

Viking Number 2

by nneurosis

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Summary: Normally, she didn't begrudge the opinions of strangers (or she at least preferred to seem as though she didn't), but when the whole archipelago is hunting you down because they're mistakenly convinced you're dating the Pride of Berk, Hope and Heir of the Hooligan Tribe, Dragon Master et alâ€"that's annoying. And mortifying. Mainly mortifying.

## 1. Stubborn

A/N: The following takes place about a year after Defenders of Berk concludes, and features some references to it and to RoB, but knowledge of the series is far from necessary. The one thing I would let you know is that Dagur the Deranged is a central villain from the show; you can look him up on the wikia if you'd like to know more. Also, my version of Phlegma is distant from the Phlegma of slightly obscure canon, but I liked the fanon name so muchâ€|

Lastly, any anachronisms you might notice are just a part of that HTTYD charm!

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid had this Problem.<p>

Now additionally, she had quite a few issues, quandaries, and small inconveniences, etc. Tasks and people and ideas that kept her days long and caused her grief; broken saddles, fears of adulthood. Distance between her and what was left of her family.

But this wasn't like that. This was a Problem, capital P, with all the bells and whistles and death-defying stunts, the making of a bard's best tale.

Through some off-base slander and gossip the entire archipelago had got it in their heads that she, Astrid Hofferson, held the key to



controlling Berk.

This wasn't so bad at first. Sure, it became surreptitiously trendy among the less savory types to kidnap and ransom her against whatever ridiculous demand they had: the last Night Fury, Berk's territory, even the chieftom of the Hooligan tribe itself. Why they thought any Hooligan would bow to an antagonistic outsider was beyond Astrid, but Vikings, you may have noticed, occasionally develop unrealistic expectations of themselves. But Astrid took strife in stride; she was herself a Viking.

That November morning, like most November mornings in their neck of the woods, started off cold and only grew colder once you were airborne. But they'd had a long week of training, trying to do what they could before winter's full wrath was on Berk. She was ready to be alone, so she'd headed to a spot on an unnamed island where she liked to clear her head when the Academy was out for a few hours. Yet the place seemed quiet that day: no animals, even the wild dragons were hiding. The hair on the back of her neck had prickled, enough to make her reach for her axe, and when someone clubbed her over the head she wished the reflex had arrived a half-second sooner.

Astrid woke in chains on that same island, head pounding and throat arid, with Dagur the Deranged's voice ringing in her ears. She spent the next two days bound and gagged, listening to him prattle on about crushing Hiccup's heart in his fist, though after several hours she suspected their favorite Berserk might be more interested in winning said heart than breaking it. So that was weird.

When you're being held captive as the target of a premeditated attack by your tribe's greatest human threat to date, it might seem easy to get a big head. To think, \_hey, I must be pretty special, if they've cornered me ten to one!\_ And as easy as you think that might seem, Astrid found it easier. Of course, she wanted to kill them all, too. But it was kind of nice, to be considered essential to Berk. They'd targeted her because they knew that in combined dragon riding and melee skill, she was the Hooligans' best asset, instrumental to their military success, and the Berserks were right! Where enemies were concerned, it was always Hiccup-this and Hiccup-that. Astridâ€”and the rest of the riders, she supposedâ€”might as well have been invisible. Lately, that sentiment had even circled back to the source. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been alone with Hiccup, not that it mattered.

So there was Astrid, prisoner of the Berserks, feeling rather self-important, while she cooled her heels planning an escape and caught snippets of Dagur's speeches along the way. If she'd listened closely from the start she might've saved herself some time.

Because Dagur kept saying how he was going to hit his nemesis where it \_really\_ counted, how he was going to use Hiccup's soft heart against him, to find the chink in his armor and exploit his weakness. And how that un-Viking little man would sing for mercy when he heard Dagur had his ladylove all up in chains, how he would swoon pathetically into Dagur's arms and coo, \_ooooo, Dagur, I'm so sorry I was mean, I'm a terrible freckled slender thing\_ (you see how Astrid come to her conclusion about Dagur's unwitting motives), and on and on and on. For two days. He had referred to her as Hiccup's "ladylove" three times before she really heard it, and her pride imploded.



Normally, she didn't begrudge the opinions of strangers (or she at least preferred to seem as though she didn't), but when the whole archipelago is hunting you down because they're mistakenly convinced you're dating the Pride of Berk, Hope and Heir of the Hooligan Tribe, Dragon Master et alâ€"that's annoying. And mortifying. Mainly mortifying.

About twenty minutes after she realized this, a surge of embarrassed adrenaline helped her take out three Berserk guards, retrieve her beloved axe, incapacitate another two oafs, and free Stormfly in time for Dagur to arrive back from his supper with reinforcements. Stormfly helpfully nailed them to the side of a cliff, and as Astrid departed, she made sure to let Dagur know he shouldn't get his hopes up about Hiccup. He blushed through his face tattoo, and her dragon climbed. The island shrunk beneath them.

As she approached Berk on dragonback she fell in behind what looked her very own search party, returning empty-handed and grim-faced. They'd already touched down and dismounted in the village square by the time Tuffnut (of all people) turned around and shouted, "WAIT, I FOUND HER."

And then there was the inevitable mob of Hooligans with burning questions and concern. Stormfly got bombarded by a friendly Toothless so Astrid stood alone, surrounded on all sides by what felt like every human being on the island, a veritable mob patting her and telling her it was going to be okay, and she wanted to scream, it won't be if you keep touching me!, but somehow she doubted that'd go over well. There was her mother and the twins with Snotlout and Fishlegs; even Silent Sven, who'd come all the way from his farm to help search, nodded his happiness. Stoick roared of relief, Gothi stood off to the side giving silent thanks to Odin. It took a mop of auburn hair with freckles emerging from the crowd to ask, finally, "What happened to you?"

She looked at Hiccup and her stomach dropped.

The villagers fell silent. They never used to do that when he spoke, but things had changed, they were still changing. She and Hiccup, for example, had once been combative acquaintances, then nearly enemies, then good friends. Then, whatever they were right now. Chief's son and subject, maybe. He looked different. Even after only two days, it seemed like his face had shiftedâ€"thinned, perhaps. Was his jaw more pronounced, or was it some new upward tilt in his chin that radiated leadership?

Her mother's eyes bored down at Astrid, the reassuring hand on her arm about the most physical contact they'd shared since her infancy. She gulped. Gods help herâ€"she couldn't say it. Not here, not in front of everyone.

She kicked at the ground. "Just, you know. Berserks held me captive for two days. Dagur says hi."

The Hooligans stirred at that name. Their history with Dagur was storied and unpleasant.

"Dagur?" Hiccup repeated, color rising in his face. "What's he want?" So the Berserks hadn't gotten around to sending the ransom demand



before she escaped. (Probably stumbling over how to make "we have your ladylove, do our bidding" sound sufficiently threatening.) Well, good. She didn't notice the weight on her shoulders until she felt it lift.

But there was a definite how-dare-he-lay-a-finger-on-someone-so-important edge to Hiccup's voice when he asked after Dagur's intentions. \_There's your problem\_, she grumbled inwardly.

"Uh, the usual. Defensive plans. Gimme that Night Fury or I'll bring out the armada. You know, typical Dagur stuff."

"And why'd he come after you? Just you?"

"Why \_not\_ me?" she asked sharply. Hiccup frowned, as if to say, \_you know it doesn't work that way\_, and she shrugged in concession. "Crime of opportunity, I guess?" She didn't meet his eye, but he was too busy exchanging meaningful chiefly glances with his dad to notice.

"Everyone should be on high alert from here on out," Hiccup announced, and then he regarded her carefully. "I'm glad you're okay, Astrid."

"Thanks," she managed. Hiccup, Stoick and Gobber strode off importantly, and the rest of the villagers scattered in their wake. \_Thor's thundering balls\_. Stormfly reappeared at her side and she nearly collapsed against her dragon right there on the village green. She was no natural-born liar: she could've taken down Dagur's men six times over with the energy she'd expended concealing the truth from Hiccup and the villagers. The part of her mature beyond embarrassment screamed in protest, but if Hiccup could pretend Astrid wasn't special, she could too.

Hiccup made some rule about no solo flights for a week, but it was difficult for Astrid to take the whole "high alert" thing seriously when she knew what was actually going on. In an ironic and humiliating twist of events, she ran into a pirate fleet prepared with nets only fifteen minutes into her first solo outing since the new security measures. She'd have assumed they only wanted to rob her or sell her into slavery or something, except they kept pointing and shouting "the dragon boy's girlfriend!" as they launched their attack.

\_Honestly\_. It had been one celebratory, public kiss per year since he took down the Red Death. Two kisses in total. Two kisses and she was Mrs. Haddock to the entire Viking world. \_This\_ was the exact sort of predictable behavior that had kept her from initiating anything more \_private\_ in the first placeâ€"

No. Scratch that. She touted the party line and the party line was: Not Interested. Haddock was at its most attractive battered and fried with mushy peas, not shot up two heads since last summer and starting to fill out.

The pirates downed her and Stormfly briefly but got no further. Whoever had tipped them off about her likely hadn't warned that the Dragon Boy's Girlfriend came heavily armed. Astrid burned their sails and left them adrift, hoping they'd reach the shores of Berserker



Island and cure Dagur's boredom.

\_None of this phases me\_, she told herself. Swallowing some residual skittishness after having been assaulted there not a week ago, she stopped off at her island on the way home and practiced burying her axe in a tree. A meek voice in her head suggested telling Hiccup what was going on, but the force of her resistance to this idea was such that she muttered "No" out loud, standing there by herself in the forest. Stormfly gave her a critical look, but she was not having it. She could handle this. And after she'd deftly fended off two attempts, word should spread of her competence and everyone would realize they were barking up the wrong sea stack.

That did not happen.

In fact, her capability under attack seemed to have the opposite effect on the archipelago's villains.

For every story of defeat, a new cluster of baddies decided capturing her was the best way to prove their own super-Viking-ness. There were Outcasts in ships off Berk's northern coast and Uglithugs on Dragon Island and more damn pirates. Typically she got a kick out of beating up random assailants, but this was a \_lot\_ of random assailants, and she couldn't leave the village without her axe drawn. And then there was the lyingâ€"more lying than ever. The lying was the real liability, she knew, not the new dents in her armor, or the gash on her arm from a slow dodge. She was native to tangible aggression, but lying fit her like another person's armorâ€"too tight in the chest, the weight of it exhausting. It wasn't like her and also, she sucked at it. People were going to notice.

Thankfully her mother had planned a raiding party for that month and, like a true Hofferson, refused to cancel it in the wake of Astrid's brief disappearance. Her mom responded to slights from the gods by bravely acting like everything was just A-Okay, which might give you some idea of how Astrid had developed her special means of problem solving. As long as her mom was gone, she had the house to herself, and had only to worry about the face she put on for the rest of the village. Which was fine, because the rest of the village was pretty stupid when it came to these kinds of things.

Except Hiccup.

It was truly \_remarkable\_ how, after months and months of barely laying eyes on Hiccup, she seemed to see him everywhere. When she thought she might want more of him in her life, he went away; when she was determined to live without him, he appeared in new seriousnessâ€"every room dimpled to the gravity of his presence, like the universe finally understood his place in it. Or maybe only she felt that, but she was sure something fundamental had changed in him. He was unpredictable. Well, he was always a little unpredictable, what with the whole dragon-befriending thing. But now, really, for the first time, it scared her.

(He didn't know it, but she'd seen him, one of those rare times, late at night. She'd been bringing Stormfly's saddle back after an evening flight, and there was Hiccup alone, drilling with his sword and shield in the torch-lit arena. No mistaking that leg. The droop in his shoulders suggested he'd been at it for an hour or more: leave it to Hiccup to know everything about dragons and nothing about weight



training. She'd wondered why he even needed that when he had a bloody Night Fury, but that was Hiccup for youâ€”a skinny enigma. If less skinny than he used to be.)

Imagine: her, Astrid Hofferson, scared of Hiccup Haddock. \_So\_ much change.

She did her best to avoid him. Planned her visits to the forge when she knew he'd be on Academy business. Lurked outside the Great Hall at meal times to ensure her coming coincided with his going, so she could pop past him with nothing more than a nod and a smile. And it shouldn't have been hard, the avoidance. He'd been practically inviting her to do it. He had no right to be mad, and she had no reason to feel guilty, or miss him at all.

But then there she was returning to the village, a little rattled after an encounter with some Outcasts who'd called her "Dragon Princess," and she got into a full-body collision with the manâ€”boyâ€”himself.

Initially she just grunted the apology she'd give any stranger, but recognition washed over her.

"Sorry," she said again, this time sort of weirdly, though she hoped he wouldn't pick up on that.

Except that he picked up on everything. "Excuse me, Astrid." The platitude sounded cheerful but the look he gave her was all inquiry.

She thought, \_run\_, and was turning to do just that when he piped up again.

"Do you have any extra spines?"

She glanced back, the question's strangeness squashing her discomfort.

"What?"

"Er, spines. Stormfly's." He mimed spikes coming out of his head and maybe, just barely, the corners of her mouth ticked up. "That might've fallen off, during the night, orâ€”"

Her eyes narrowed instinctively, as they always did with unprefaced demands. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I'm working on something."

Oh, oh ho ho ho. He wanted her to ask what it was! What a classicâ€”stupid, obviousâ€”grinning was all she could do to keep from mouthing \_wow\_.

Well no bully for him, because if there was one thing she couldn't abide, it was losing a verbal match to Hiccup. \_Never\_.

"Okay. I'll bring some by the forge later," she said brightly and, having sidestepped his trap, she waited for his face to fall. Which it did, butâ€”there was something disingenuous about it. Which meantâ€”



"Great!" Hiccup grinned and sauntered off, whistling like an idiot.

\_Double tricked\_.

How could she should not show up at the forge! That'd show him. Or would it? Did he expect her to get angry and bail? Or did he expect her to expect he'd expect her to get angry and bail, so she would show up anyway? Gods, she just wanted to know what he wanted so she could do the opposite. It didn't seem like much to ask, really, \_Hiccup\_. The skinny enigma had struck again.

She was still debating what to do when she found herself collecting the spines littered around Stormfly's stall. The dragon, curled up there, made a low guttural sound. "Just the ones you don't need anymore, girl," she muttered, half to herself. It was hard to tell to what extent Stormfly always understood her on a level, sure, but Hiccup \_conversed\_ with Toothless. He was the best with the dragons, she could admit. She could also admit that she wasn't so bad herself, but sometimes above average wasn't good enough, particularly when it came to compensating for her upbringing. Fourteen years of kill dragons, kill dragons. One had taken her father. Two years ago, in Hiccup's shoes If Gothi had chosen her as the top training student, Berk would be now exactly as it was then. That thought had afforded her more than a few sleepless nights.

Something rustled outside the stall and she looked up: Toothless, tongue lolling eagerly at Stormfly. Her dragon perked up and eyed her, wanting permission. She glanced at the two creatures around the armful of spines. "Oh. Yeah, go play, I guess." As they flapped off together, it occurred to her that this might be yet another ploy on Hiccup's part to get her to the forge, and the idea was so exasperating that she conceded right then and there and started across the village, spines in tow.

She could hear him talking, but it was past dinner, so she doubted Gobber or any customers had hung around. Astrid slipped in the front, and saw Hiccup hunched over a workbench, back to her.

"how to rotate to the next payload, bud, that's the challenge," he muttered.

It hit her what he was doing, and she laughed.

"Do you always talk to Toothless when he's not here?"

Hiccup nearly fell off his stool swinging around to see her, his face a red blur. She dropped the spines unceremoniously on the floor between them.

"Astrid! You came. I mean I knew you would come," he added, lowering his voice in a blatant and ill-conceived cover-up. She stared at him for a long beat. He appeared to be puffing out his chest. It was hard to remember what she'd been scared of.

"You are dumb."

He nodded once, and then again. "Yes. Very much so."



They looked at each other for a moment. It felt like the first time in a long time. He smiled, a gesture that fit his face better than it once had. She couldn't help it, her reflexes betrayed her: she smiled back.

And then stopped, clearing her throat. "Here are your spines."

"Yeah. They seem great. Nice and sharp. Circumference, five inches at the widest point, maybe." He retrieved one from the floor and started examining it.

"Well. I'll thank Stormfly for you." She leaned toward the exit, and Hiccup noticed, concern flashing across his ruddy features.

"It's a catapult that shoots spines," he said, stepping forward. "Sort of like a crossbow, but bigger, and the payload rotates soâ€"so you don't have to reload each time, you can have multiple shots. It'll be like a mechanical Nadder except without wings orâ€|. Or anything like that. It's for defending the town."

"Thatâ€|" Astrid shifted in place: he wanted her to stay for some reason, and it was hard not to feel violated by the interest. "Sounds neat, actually."

He nodded, and then switched gears, asking with contrived nonchalance, "So what's up with you?"

She raised an eyebrow, then sighed. "Nothing much."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How'd you get that cut on your arm?"

That cut. The slow dodge from a few days ago. She glanced down at it, having nearly forgotten. It was bandaged with a scrap of cloth, and she'd been applying a poultice nightly, but the healing was a journey. She'd have a scar.

"I fell," she replied automatically.

Hiccup barely registered her answer. "You've brought your axe in three times in two weeks." He said that plainly, like he just knew, which aggravated her. She didn't like to be watched.

"So?"

"You haven't been skirmishing with anyone latelyâ€"

"I haven't, you're right."

"â€"but you're using your axe moreâ€"

"It's a good axe."

Hiccup took a large step toward her, drawing her eye up to meet his new height.



"Who are you fighting?"

\_A bunch of louts laboring under the grand delusion that I'd ever date you\_.

"Trees," she simpered.

Hiccup, whose confidence had been growing throughout this encounter, seemed thrown by her answer. It came easy because it wasn't exactly a lie, not when they both knew she had bigger enemies than the pines.

"Astrid," he said, for the first time reading desperate. "I am just tryingâ€"

"Fine!" She didn't want to know what it was he was \_trying\_ to do with this line of inquiry; and besides, there was a way around her dilemma. "There have been attacks since Dagur."

Hiccup had guessed this, so he didn't look terribly surprised, but his chin lifted. She could see New Hiccup emerging again. "How many?"

"Four. Five all together." He exhaled sharply and turned away from her. "A couple of other tribes and some pirates. I'm \_fine\_," she added, like it made the omission acceptable. Like she wasn't omitting still.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're not chief yet, Hiccup." He glanced at her, visibly hurt, but she held fast. He needed to hear it from someone. "Anyway, I thought I could handle it."

And then, he did a very Hiccup thingâ€"he surprised her: "Well, obviously, that'sâ€| completely true." He sounded fed up, so it took her a second to process what he actually meant.

She didn't blush. Okay, she blushed a little. She'd \_known\_ it was true, of course, butâ€"well. Whatever.

"And you've got no idea what they want from \_you\_? Like you, specifically?"

Time to lie. She took a breath in preparation, and then shook her head. "No clue."

"Huh." He moved back to his workbench, falling on to the stool. Astrid exhaled. "I'd say try to get it out of them, next time, but there's not going to be a next time."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, instantly overwrought. "You can't make me stay in the village, Hiccup, you don't have that power, and neither does your dad. I'm \_going \_on flightsâ€"

"Not that, relax," he laughed. She deflated slightly. "We'll just get my dad to put a guard on you." He grabbed a scrap of paper and a charcoal pen, ready to plan.



Her stomach convulsed. "I don't need that."

"It's no problem. Everyone can do shifts, a couple of hours, and someone can stay in the house with you at night since your mom is away," he continued happily, oblivious to her expression.

"No, no, I don't want a guard, Hiccup." Her voice cracked and he looked up, noticing finally her seriousness and distress. She didn't need to be babysat, and a guard would only reinforce these people's notion of her as some trophy. The idea of needing someone to watch over her tapped a deep-seated fear of helplessness, one bred a long time ago, under the cloud of her father's death. "No guard, you said yourself that I can handle it."

"Yeah, but this isn't like that, we'd do this for anybody—"

"No guard." She folded her arms across her chest. The look on her face must've been pretty terrifying, because he gulped. "And you won't tell Stoick, or anyone. You're sworn to secrecy. I don't want to look out my window tomorrow morning and see you, or your dad, or Gobber or—" or anyone sitting on my front stoop with a sword. None of that."

His gulping turned to gaping. "That's insane, you're joking!"

"Yes," she said stonily. "I seem hilarious right now, don't I?"

After a second of reading her, he stared off into the fire, blustering. "Well— then how am I— what, then?"

Full protection worried her, but a little help didn't sound so bad. It took effort to bury that and say what she said. "If it happens again, I'll let you know."

"If it happens again," he repeated. "So you're just gonna—"

"Keep doing what I'm doing. Yeah. I'll try to figure out what they want from me," she lied.

"Well, this is— not— completely crazy?"

She had been glaring at him for sometime now, but the only improvement she could manage was downgrading to a scowl. "It's seriously fine, Hiccup. Stop worrying about me." Hopefully that didn't come off as pleading. She tagged on brusquely, "And mind your own business. No more spying."

Hiccup's mouth popped open in preparation to speak, but he seemed to reconsider his words, and raised his hands in surrender. "Understood, milady."

She headed back to the house, leaving Hiccup hunched over his contraption. The cocktail of nervous excitement, dread, and a mystery feeling that made her cheeks run hot left Astrid buzzing, wide awake in the late evening hour. It would be light out for another forty-five minutes, still, so she could train, or go for a flight, assuming Stormfly was back. She took the front steps two at a time, her head boiling, but stopped dead in the doorway.



"Mom. You're home early."

Phlegma stood at the hearth, still armored but for her helmet, which she held under her arm. In her other hand was a flagon of mead. She loomed taller than her daughter but not much broader, with square features and an air of implacable nobility. As a girl she would listen to stories of the goddess Freya and picture her mother's unflappable face.

"I am," she said in her soft low brogue. "I've come home to see my daughter."

Instantly, Astrid was nervous. "Oh?" In another household, this might've passed for a random act of familial generosity, but the Hoffersons worked differently. Phlegma wouldn't have come home for her daughter unless that daughter had done something. More specifically, something very wrong.

"My dear," her mother began. "There is a sort of unregulated bounty out on a young warrior maid from our isle of Berk. From what I've gathered, several tribes believe there's a prize for her capture, and though they know not where to bring this girl or what they'll receive in return for her, it matters not. Our people sometimes lack the gift of forward-thinking." Phlegma lowered herself into a chair, pausing to sip her mead. "They say this maid has long fair hair and blue eyes, and rides a blue and orange Deadly Nadder. They also say she is lover to the Hooligan Heir, and maybe not be such a maid after all."

Here was a nightmare scenario. Astrid briefly imagined herself melting down between the floorboards, but something about her mom's strength made her feel strong, too. It made her want to be just as good. She wrung her hands behind her back.

"I think they slander that maid, then."

"You think?" Phlegma asked her mead.

"They could have the whole wrong idea about her. She could just be any old Hooligan warrior."

Phlegma smiled a knowing smile. "I doubt that." But the mirth fell away from her face, and she gazed at her daughter. "You are not safe, Astrid."

"I'm fine," she insisted.

"Even the heroes who defeat the odds do so with armies at their backs." This was the sort of packaged wisdom Astrid had been receiving in place of parental guidance her entire life—"Phlegma's personal brand of empathy was a bit impersonal.

She gritted her teeth. "Good thing I'm not a hero."

Phlegma dropped her head, eyes fluttering shut. "We'll let the chief look after you while I spread word of the bounty's lies." This again. Anger surged in her chest.

"I don't need to be looked after, Mom, just tell the stupid pirates to leave me alone and I'll be fine."



"I don't think so, dear."

"It's ridiculous, you know, the way you always tell us to fight our own battles and show individual valor, to be all brave and bold and without weakness, but the second that actually means something, you're soâ€" She couldn't finish the rant. The 'you' and 'us' she referred to were universal monikers, though she doubted Snotlout and the twins ever felt this misguided by the Viking way. Hiccup would have understood.

Her mother remained infuriatingly soft-tongued. "You're young, Astrid. Perhaps we have taught you too well in certain ways, but you don't understand the threat you're facing. You can't do this alone."

"I can," she said, full of desperate rage. She had heard this one too many times, now, and the stress of the situation had begun to take its toll. She'd spent two weeks being cornered, netted, bound and pinned; the last thing she needed was to feel trapped here at home. Her eyes welled with frustrated tears.

Phlegma sat silently for a moment and then shook her head. This struck Astrid violentlyâ€"it was as though she weren't even worth a verbal explanation.

Snapping, she made a dash for the front door and went storming out from the village, where the dying sun lit her path. Her mother didn't call after her.

She marched through the woods for a good twenty minutes, until she had to catch her breath. The last of the orange daylight glinted through the trees. Night would be on her soon, and the way back was a long one. The ground would likely freeze over. The awareness of this danger mounted onto her existing anger made Astrid's eyes run blurry with tears, and she drew her axe. Taxed and spent beyond vexation, she needed to destroy something.

She got most of the way through chopping down a pine in half the time it would normally take her, and as the tree fell she screamed at the top of her lungs, unable to keep hitting but far from satisfied. Her hands shook on the hilt of her weapon and she collapsed on to the new flat tree stump. The heat of exercised warmed her, at least. The clearing didn't seem familiar, and in the twilight she couldn't even recognize from which direction she'd come. Great. She sighed: this night could very well be the one to prove her mother right. Alone but for the gods.

A very practical line in her head was going on about the common sense nature of her mother's requests, reminding her that she was only a girl and need not be invincible, and that she must not misunderstand the true nature of strength, but if she couldn't hold her own in this fight, could she ever save the village? Could she defeat a Red Death and shift the tide of her people's history? Would she ever be that kind of hero? No, said a smaller, meaner voice. And it was right, probably. She knew that of herself, she had never wanted to change the world. But she still could be a different kind of hero. She could see her future clearly, if only the Hooligan Tribe would get out of her way, or assure her that the constraint was temporary. Astrid knew herself, and she knew she would find her place in Berk's story, even



if she hadn't quite pinned down the exact location yet.

And sitting there in the forest, knowing herself so well, she was able to quietly concede that she had been maybe a smidge stubborn about this whole thing.

A twig snapped somewhere behind her. Astrid froze. She might not have panicked right away, but she didn't have time to gauge her own fear, because immediately seven figures emerged from the shadowy tree line, six hulking men and one thinner frame. Berserks. \_On\_ Berk, Hooligan territory.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the blonde terror," crooned Dagur from the center of the pack. "Weeping over the boy, huh?" This guy was full on \_strutting\_ toward her, for Thor's sake.

"If you're going to 'well, well, well' me, you could at least attempt something a little more creative," she said, irritated rather than frightened. Dagur had that effect on her.

"I don't need to be creative!" His cool evaporated, as it tended to do with Dagur. "I'm very creative! Shut up! Tie her up," he called to the men, and they stepped toward her.

Astrid raised her axe. Her distress of minutes ago melted away—this was the sort of moment she lived for. Already she could feel her blood run quicker with the rush of battle. "Okay, let's go."

"Wait, stop!" cried a new voice, one that Astrid knew before she even saw the accompanying stick-person.

Hiccup appeared from the forest behind her, bearing a rusted sword and his Gronkle Iron shield.

"Hiccup!" Dagur sounded incensed but somehow thrilled, which might've made Astrid laugh if she weren't \_busy\_.

"Get back, \_now\_," Hiccup shouted to Dagur's men. The authority in his tone was such that they actually seemed puzzled about who was their leader for a moment, looking back and forth between Dagur and Hiccup in confusion.

Of course, Astrid did not notice this. She also didn't notice the new confidence with which he held his weapon, or the dramatic improvements in his stance, or the strategically correct fashion in which he brandished his shield. She was \_busy\_.

"\_Hiccup\_," she said finally, through clenched teeth.

"Hi, Astrid!"

"You're here. Where I am."

"Yep, that is correct."

Dagur waved his arms stupidly. "Hello? I'm kidnapping someone over here?"

Astrid raised a hand to silence him. "Yeah, we'll get to you in a minute, weirdo. Hiccup, what was the \_one thing\_ I asked you not to



do?"

"Follow you," he replied blithely, assessing their enemy.

"And how did you get here?"

"I followed you." He glanced at her, since the force of the glare she was giving him demanded it. "I wasn't going to let you see me!"

"That is unbelievably condescending, you littleâ€"

"Lover's spat," chortled one of the beefier Berserks.

She turned on him. "I WILL MURDER YOU."

"\_Lover's\_ spat?" repeated Hiccup. Dagur, struck by Hiccup's disbelief, eyed him curiously and advanced on the pair.

"Take them both!"

Two Berserks were on her at once, and Astrid flung herself into high gear. The swings of their axes packed a lot of force, but she had the advantage of a lighter weapon and a larger target. The difficulty was parrying two sets of blowsâ€"it ate up much of her concentration, but not all of it. Not by a long shot. She could only just see Hiccup out the corner of her eye.

"You know, you really have trouble with overstepping your bounds sometimes, Hiccup!"

A mace rattled loudly off his shield. "You really have trouble admitting when you need help, so I guess we're well-matched."

"This is very romantic," roared a red-faced Dagur. "But we need to hurry, the Night Fury will catch up with him soon. I am taking you both prisoner now. With separate cells!"

"Real torture," laughed a big guy stupidly.

"What does that mean?" Hiccup shouted. "Am I missing something? Why are you harassingâ€" He dodged the particularly nasty swing of a broadsword. "â€"Astrid? I am feeling very uninformed, here." Astrid let out a shriek of annoyance and swung around to face him, forgetting the fight.

"They think we are dating, Hiccup!"

He dropped his weapon as well. "They what?"

"They think we're dating and they're trying to use me as a way to get to you. It's wrong but it's pretty simple as an idea, so I hope you're not going to struggle with it or anything, because that would be really annoying and I'm already dealing with this." She gestured to the Berserks, who were all standing around with their weapons raised, not knowing what to do, exactly. Dagur looked aghast.

"Dating?" Hiccup squeaked.



"Yeah, dating."

"You andâ€"and \_me\_?"

"Thor, give me strength," she yelled upwards.

"Whyâ€| would theyâ€| think that," he managed, unsuccessfully disguising his embarrassment. His cheeks were bright red.

"You know, I have no idea, because if it were me looking at us, I'd probably have said we weren't even friends." She did nothing to soften her words and he went from blushing to pale in an instant, embarrassment deepening into shame. She felt a grim satisfaction at the look on his face.

Less satisfying was the net that surrounded her in the next second, and she let loose surprised holler. Hiccup, to her right, made very much the same sound as he too found himself netted. She fought to get out, but it was difficult to hack at a net from beneath it, and one of the Berserks tugged the cords by her feet, sending her sprawling.

"Astrid!" Hiccup cried, but she couldn't see him from the ground. Someone trod on her wrist and then her axe was gone; she had lost the fight, for the time being, and the rest of her kicks and scratches at Dagur's men were more misdemeanor than assault.

They'd pulled the same trick to disarm Hiccupâ€"especially nasty, considering his prosthesisâ€"and after binding their hands, the Berserks wound the nets around them as further restriction, which provided humiliation in addition to constriction.

"Told you not to struggle with it," she called to Hiccup, who was looking even less pleased with his net than she.

Her back was to him so she had only a disjointed conception of where he stood, and his disembodied voice drifted to her over the rumblings of their captors. "I'm \_sorry\_, it was a lot to handle. I mean, why was it exactly that you decided not to tell me this earlier? Like, when I asked if you knew why they were attacking you, and you said you had no clue? Was that justâ€| just because it \_slipped your mind\_, huh, Astrid? Or is it maybe, kind of a big deal to you too?"

It was a good thing he couldn't see her face, because he might've had an idea how much this question cowed her. She stood silent for a moment, and then tried, "It's a medium-sized deal."

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on what you considered to be the real danger of this situation), Dagur chose this moment to move out. "We march to back to the fleet," he ordered. The group of Berserk oafs started nudging them along single file down a narrow path to the shore, with plenty of stalling when Astrid or Hiccup tripped over a bit of net. Dagur, who led the line, started to prattle.

"I won't make the same mistake again," he told the dark woods. "There's no escaping this time!"

"OR IS THERE?" shouted Hiccup from behind him.



"No, there isn't!" Dagur shrieked back. "Gods, shut \_up\_, Hiccup. You ruin \_everything\_, I lovâ€"hate it! I hate it."

Astrid met the eye of the Berserk shoving her along; the ice in her gaze and the venom in her voice were enough to make him shiver.

"Boys," she said, "are \_dumb\_."

\* \* \*

><p>AN: So this is my first story in this fandom. I originally designed it to be a one-shot and then realized I had a lot more to say, and I could see this going all the way up to HTTYD2 and beyond. But I don't really know if the interest is there, so PLEASE, if you like the fic let me know, through favoriting/reviewing/following or however, and that way I can feel confident about bringing you more.

## 2. The Old Order

A/N: I'm glad everyone seemed to like (or at least felt intrigued by) the first chapter. Here's the second installment, which is about half talking and half doing, and divided up in that order. My intention with this chapter is not only to continue the plot but expand on some of what might've been troubled about the last, so I hope it answers questions. Also, I want to caution that there's what we would call an ableist slur used in this chapter. Just fair warning, as I believe in preparing readers for that sort of thing.

\* \* \*

><p>Across the dark bay, to where Hiccup and Astrid sat chained in the prow of a Berserker longboat, came the excruciating cries of a panicked Night Fury.<p>

It was a sound Astrid had heard before, but never with this intensity, and familiarity did nothing to ease the churning of her gut. For Hiccup she knew the long minutes they listened to Toothless crying were nothing short of agony, as he coiled against the side of the boat, his face screwed up with the effort of blocking it out. The sound grew fainter but no less fervent as the fleet sailed from Berk, screams occasionally descending into splashes as the dragon launched failed attempts to follow. He couldn't make it in the open sea swimming, she guessed. It was too deep, the currents were too strong; there was no way he'd catch up to them. Moreover, he likely knew Hiccup wouldn't have wanted him to try.

Finally, around minute twenty-two, it stopped. There was only the litany of the waves and the rustling of Berserks at rest; Toothless had given up. Hiccup's shoulders fell away from his ears.

After a heavy moment, she broke the silence with a tentative question. "Do you think he'll sound the alarm?"

Even by the poor light of the moon she could see Hiccup's nausea. He replied, straining to sound levelheaded, "He'll try. We'll see how much my dad understands. Worst case scenario, they don't know we're gone until morning."



"And Fishlegs, with the tracking dragons, how longâ€¦"

"More than enough time for us to get really settled into our prison pit on Berserker Island. Hang a few drapes. I like red, what do you think?" Another time she might've been irritated by his insistence on humor under pressure, but here she found it oriented her. It was comforting. It was better than being captured alone.

But she still rolled her eyes at him. Force of habit.

"And Stormfly," he asked, "is there any chanceâ€¦"

Astrid shook her head. "She'll have gone back to her stall when it got dark. Too well trained, probably." She gave Hiccup a meager smile, but he didn't return the expression.

Most of the Berserks on board the ship slept soundly, unfazed by the sound of dragon anguish or the tenants of attentive soldiering. In their defense, even Dagur had been thoroughly knackered by his day of deranging, and he snored, slumped over a barrel not too far from Hiccup and Astrid. Only the Helmsman stayed awake, and he stood at the opposite end of the boat, eyes trained on the horizon. The prow was so narrow her boots brushed Hiccup's as they sat opposite one another. Their chains didn't secure them to the deck, presumably because they'd be too weighted down to swim if they jumped. But if they could get loose somehow, it was only November, and the sea would be warm after a sunny summer.

"I take it you're mad at me," Hiccup broached casually.

"We should check our chains for weak or rusted spots," Astrid said, steamrolling past his comment. "We can swim if we hurry, it's doable. Even if we can't get them off, I've trained with chains as weight sometimesâ€¦"

"Astrid."

She squinted into the night, searching for the village lights. "I could swim to shore and get help. Dagur doesn't need me now that he's got you, he might not even send anyone after meâ€¦"

Something rattled and then thunked down beside herâ€¦"Hiccup had come to sit on her side of the prow.

"Astrid," he said again, unrelenting.

"What are you doing?"

"We're never going to escape if you don't tell me why you're mad at me."

His voice had a kind of knowingness to it that made her gape, like he'd just presented her with a reality she'd never considered, and it seemed clear now how he'd magic'd the whole village into admiration. But then again, Astrid had no fondness for magic; after a moment's pause she considered his statement and her mouth snapped shut. "That's not true. We'll be fine." She could get out of a situation like this blindfolded, so doing it while annoyed at Hiccup might even prove advantageous. She did feel pretty motivated to escape this conversation.



"Yes it is, it's very true, teamwork isâ€¦| isâ€¦"it's teamwork, Astrid!"

"You're just mad that I'm mad at you!"

An edge entered his tone that rang older and angrier, and she flinched. "Yeah, I am. I'm mad that you're mad, because I have no idea what I did, or what you think I did, and I justâ€¦"I mean, as far as I can tell, I've got more of a right to be mad than you have, considering you lied about being attacked when you could've put people in dangerâ€¦"

"This is not about that," she shot back, riled by the scolding. She did her best to swing to her left and glare at him in spite of the chains, but the gesture lost some drama in her struggling. "Where have you been, Hiccup?\_"

"Where have Iâ€¦| is that whatâ€¦"

"Our Saturday flights, every week for a year and a half and then nothing, and you don't stay after at the Academy like you used to, you just come and tell us all what to do and then leaveâ€¦"which isn't helpful, by the way, Fishlegs is a more useful teacher at this pointâ€¦"but you wouldn't know that because you've heard him, what, one time? But at least you're not showing up at the Great Hall when we drink anymore, because I'm really enjoying the lack of sanctimonious lectures on our bad conduct." Hiccup's face had fallen into shadow under the moonlight. She slowed slightly, out of breath, pressing into each word. "So I apologize to you, my future chief, for endangering the village\_, since that's all you are to me, and that's the only reason you're upset. Right, sir?"

Hiccup, possibly for the first time in a long time, had no reply. It was strangely frightening to speak to him and not hear his odd little voice croak out a response right away. She didn't care to posit what that fear meant.

Eventually there came a small-sounding answer. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd care."

"You didn't think I'd care?" she repeated, with a softness that she realized too late seemed more hurt than angry.

"Well, I don't exactlyâ€¦|" Hiccup appeared to lose the thought and his gaze drifted away from her, toward home. Then he said, with some difficulty, as if this were a revealing explanation, "My dad started calling me the Pride of Berk."

Astrid waited for the rest, but nothing came. Not at first, anyway. Hiccup just stared off into space, his mouth twitching occasionally like it wanted to form words but couldn't quite remember how. She knew Hiccup's relationship with his father was not unlike the relationship she had with her own single parentâ€¦"fraught, clouded by expectations, strained but ultimately loving. She sometimes wondered how they'd ended up so different, what with the similarity in their upbringings, but blood had to count for something.

"I got a lot taller," he said finally.



"I've noticed." He smiled at her, and she had to lift her chin up a bit to smile back. Which she hadn't meant to do in the first place—she was supposed to be mad, still.

"Have you also noticed that people tend to treat you differently based on the way you look?"

Astrid laughed, because she didn't think he could fathom the permanence of this fact in her life. "Yeah, Hiccup. I've noticed that too."

"Hm. Well. I noticed it before, definitely, I just didn't really think it could make such a quick turn around." He sighed; she could sense the real explanation on its way. "You know, even after the Red Death, I didn't feel lost at all. I felt like I'd just figured something out about myself, and I could look at my reflection and still see someone I recognized. I had some confidence for the first time in my life. It was good—it was great, even."

"And now you look different," she filled in.

He nodded. "Now I'm the Pride of Berk. People look at me like—like I'm going to be chief someday. What is that? What does that mean for me? What do I do with all of this?" he asked, gesturing to his newly stretched frame.

"Practice with your sword when everyone else is asleep, maybe?" Hiccup looked at her sharply, and Astrid grinned. "You're not the only one who can keep tabs."

"I wasn't keeping tabs, I was—I was concerned, is all."

"So was I," she said without thinking, though she had never considered the possibility before. Hiccup had shut her out at a time when he was changing himself; she'd been worried all along. The thought frightened her—her anger had made its exit, sure, but with it went a safe sense of injustice. It was easier for her to be mad at Hiccup, it always had been. She had to preface kisses with punches, just so he wouldn't think he'd won her over completely.

"I needed to think, I guess. To be alone. I was cooking," he reasoned, and she snorted softly. The easy, friendly moment in the conversation made Hiccup feel bold, apparently, because he added, "And you—you really didn't seem as, uh—" "

"What?" demanded Astrid, alert at the prospect of being blamed.

"Well, you hadn't kissed me in a while, so I assumed..." Blood rushed to her face—a combination of embarrassment and fury.

"So we can only be friends if I kiss you? Seriously, Hiccup?" He was shaking his head and trying to wave his chain-encumbered arms before she'd even got out her question.

"No, no, it—it was wrong, that's not—listen, it was very easy to trick myself into thinking I had to become someone else before you'd want to see me again."

Astrid sat back. She was still blushing. Maybe even more, now. Gods,



she really knew how to pick 'em, didn't she? Not that she'd picked Hiccup. Or that there was a thing to pick him for in the first place. She coughed, and then replied offhandedly, "Doesn't really matter who you are if I never see you, does it?"

She could hear him smile when he said, "You're right. Absolutely. I should listen to you more, Astrid."

"I've been saying that for years."

Hiccup laughed loud enough to stir a nearby brute, and they both fell silent as the big guy sneezed twice, then rolled over and went back to sleep. Hiccup sighed and started fiddling with the lock on his chains.

"Anyway, I don't think any amount of secret practice or exploring or anything is going to make me the Pride of Berk. So far all it's done is make you mad at me."

Astrid glanced at her lap. Revision: it was easier to be mad at Hiccup, but only when he wasn't around. Sitting together like this in uncomplicated proximity, while he gave her a glimpse into himself, she could only feel sort of privileged to know him, and hope he'd say the same thing of her. "Your swordsmanship has gotten better, though," she offered.

His head snapped up. "Really?"

"Yeah." She'd distracted herself from Toothless's pain by replaying everything that had happened that night in her head, and Hiccup's improvement seemed clear to her. "You're halfway decent, now. With that shield I might even say you're kind of good."

Even under the dimness of the moon, she could tell he was beaming, and new shadows bloomed on his cheeks; in the sunlight he'd probably look red. "Thanks, Astrid," he muttered. She decided to breeze by his embarrassment, even though it made her feel sort of squirmy.

"Okay, but what's with the old sword? What kind of smith fights with a secondhand weapon?"

He seemed too distracted by the compliment still to give this question much thought. "It's nothing, just something I'm trying."

"It's weird."

"Sure. So what's with you?"

She shifted awkwardly in her seat. "What do you mean, what's with me?"

"I mean, here I am baring my soul to you with such heartfelt sincerityâ€" She chortled, knocking into his shoulder. "â€"the least you could do is, you know, the same thing."

"Oh, that's it? Just bare my soul?"

"It's only fair, Astrid, come on!"



"You're so right, it's only fair," she grinned, but then it slid from her face. She realized she didn't know how to tell Hiccup what was going on with her because she barely knew herself. "I'm not sure. You're better at this look-into-yourself stuff. I never needed to do that before."

"Before what?"

"Before the Red Death. Before I thought you were ignoring me."

Hiccup sat up and turned to see her more directly, which again gave Astrid that squirmy feeling. Weird. She didn't know what it was. He asked intently, "What's so bad about them thinking you're my girlfriend that you'd lie about it?"

Astrid flushed angrily. "What, are you shocked that I'm not itching to be mistaken for your girlfriend?"

"No, no, I justâ€¦ you know it's not true, \_I \_know it's not true," (he added this second statement with a rather pitiful note in his voice), "so why should it matter what anyone else thinks?"

"Well, when they think it makes me a good targetâ€¦"

"I mean, why wouldn't you tell my dad or someone that's what it was? Even if you wouldn't tell me?"

She gulped and turned away from him, trying not to let the glare on her face give anything away. Was it possible to lose a conversation? She certainly didn't feel like she was winning.

"Do you ever feel like we're going to do something really important, like for Berk, and for the tribe, but we just don't know what it is yet?" Astrid glanced quickly at him. "I mean, you've already done that, butâ€¦"

"You did it too," he added softly, and when she only shrugged, he pressed on, "No, really. I couldn't have done it without you."

"You know," she began after a pause, "before you started showing promise, I was going to be the Pride of Berk. I was on the fast track to Viking #1, or whatever you call it. It wasn't going to be Snotlout, no matter what he thinks." In the corner of her eye, Hiccup grinned. "I guess what I'm saying is, I'll take it if you don't want it. "

"Viking #1," he repeated, obviously trying not to laugh, and she jammed an elbow into his side. "Sorry! Sorry."

"Well, sorry I don't just want to be your \_girlfriend\_, I've got other things going on."

His movements stalled. "What was that?"

"I don't want to be remembered as a chief's mother," Astrid continued, not really understanding what he'd found to be confused about, or why his blushing had started up again with a vengeance. "I guess I know there's more to do, and I want to be a part of it, and I know you're going to be a part of it." As her understanding grew clearer she



started to speak faster, growing increasingly excited at this burst of self-awareness. "\_So\_ when I felt like I wasn't going to be in your life anymore, I felt like my chance to be remembered was slipping away, and thenâ€"and then it also upsets me to be included as your girlfriend, see, because then \_that\_'s just another way I get remembered for being a girl and not for being a warrior!" She swung to face Hiccup with the glow of discovery buffing her face. "That's \_it\_."

Hiccup took a moment, and she felt him staring at her, a smile on his face that someone other than Astrid might've called adoring, but she didn't have such words in her vocabulary. "Can I make you a proposition, Astrid?" Astrid's mother, like a good many mothers in the day and age, had trained her to balk at that word; she gave him an open-mouthed, wide-eyed look, and he quickly realized his mistake. "Not likeâ€"it's just a proposal!" \_Worse\_. She started trying to crawl away from him. "Oh, whoops, uh, I just have an idea, it's not like that, come back!"

She did come back, if cautiously. "What idea?"

"When I'm chiefâ€"" She groaned but he shook his head. "Listen, when I'm chief, it won't be like that. So I propose," he offered her a hand to shake. "Partners."

"Partners?" she echoed, assessing the manacle around his wrist.

"Partners. Equals. You and me. You'll be co-chief."

Her eyes narrowed. "What about now?"

"Equals now, too."

"You're giving up a lot of your power," she pointed out.

He shrugged. "I don't really care about power."

It hadn't always been clear to Astrid what was different about Hiccup, and she still didn't know whether that difference constituted strength or weakness, but she was beginning to understand that maybe the flaw she saw in Hiccup, his un-Viking-ness, existed not in him but in the standard to which she held him. Hiccup's difference was a fundamental one: he would change things, like he said, like he already had. And yet Astrid was a Viking of the old order, at heart. If their world changed, she would have to change with it.

She bit her lip, then shook the proffered hand. "Just promise me you won't make us all become peaceable farmers."

"What?"

"Nevermind. You're the weirdest Viking I know, Hiccup Haddock." Astrid waved him away and started trying to adjust her chains in such a way that sleep might actually be possible. Meanwhile, Hiccup kicked up a little fuss, shaking his shoulders in that way he did when feeling especially defensive.

"\_I'm\_ \_weird\_, oh, yeah, right, when you're making about as much sense as Gothi after a few meadsâ€""



"Don't worry about it!"

"That is not fair." When she gestured for him to scram, he put a hand on her arm—a instinct, she knew, to still her, but they were getting to the age when touching gained different associations—and Astrid froze. Hiccup stared her down, a curious expression on his face, too nuanced for her to parse. Was he upset? They'd been arguing in near confines but she'd only just realized how close he really was, so that she could see nothing else, only green eyes and freckles. It made her a little dizzy. "Before," he said slowly, almost carefully, "you said you didn't just want to be my girlfriend."

"So?" she replied, suddenly whispering.

"So." He was whispering too, now. "Just, Astrid? You don't just want to be my girlfriend?"

"Stop saying 'my girlfriend'," she heard herself say. Was he getting closer? Could he even get closer without—oh, but Hiccup would never, had never, in all the years she'd known him— And if their noses hadn't been an inch apart, and if she hadn't felt the sticky-sweetness of his breath on her cheeks, she wouldn't have believed it.

Unfortunately for the both of them (or fortunately, again, depending on what you consider the real danger of the situation), there was ultimately nothing further to believe, because a shadow crossed over their heads, and a figure appeared above them.

"No fraternizing," grunted the helmsman. He stood slumped over, his body an odd assortment of angles hurriedly held together, with a patch concealing one eye (or lack thereof). It seemed challenging for him to glare at them with only half his face, so he started hobbling back to the longboat's rudder, taking the mood with him. Hiccup, maybe self-conscious, scooted away from her.

"We should try to sleep," she said quickly.

"Sounds good," he croaked.

"Great."

"Goodnight, Astrid."

"'Night."

As they dozed, a shadow sailed far overhead, and the longboat did not continue to Berserker Island alone.

It was pretty nice, for a prison pit. Roomy.

Despite the threats, they shared a cell, and Dagur must've found the helmsman's two twin brothers to do the day and night watches, because the two guards were equally one-eyed and uncommunicative.

Dagur did not have a plan for his prisoners. What he did have was some rough ideas about humiliating and frightening Hooligans, specifically Hiccup—he took great pleasure in making Hiccup



retrieve thrown boots from the dangerous peaks of houses, and recite sexually explicit poetry to a crowd of whooping Berserks, and do their dirtiest laundry while half-naked, with Astrid playing horrified (and occasionally amused, and occasionally something-elses) audience to all of it. He took the harassment with a passivity she found disquieting, but she'd never known Hiccup for a quitter. He was joking all the way, at least, to the exacerbated fury of Dagur and his army.

As it turned out, Astrid had been right about Dagur's lack of interest in her. She spent her captivity, like everything nowadays, on the sidelines. The realization infuriated and indebted her. But at least she had ample time to plot their escape, and observe her old friend in his new age.

And, when he wasn't being thrown off a small cliff into Berserker Bay because the idiots thought it would be funny to see if he could swim with his leg like that—"Hiccup and Astrid had time to talk, something that they hadn't done in many months. Astrid considered herself more the strong and silent type than any sort of conversationalist, but Hiccup was always interested in discussing Nadders, or improvements in axecraft, or strategic defense plans—the kinds of things she found worth talking about. She didn't know if he'd feigned that interest in pursuit of her affection, like so many idiot boys had in her life, but unlike the majority of them, Hiccup knew his dragons and axes, and he had a good head for strategy. If he'd changed himself to appeal to her, he'd done a good job of it; but she had a feeling that after months of their being apart, this was only the natural order of things coming back into play.

And Astrid dreamed about escape. She dreamed about their one-eyed guards, about the short sprint from the prison to the water if they could only get unbound. She imagined how they might assist a rescue party, should one come, by some miracle.

The third day began like the other two had: they were hauled from their cell into the center of the Berserker prison's large stone arena, and Hiccup was made to stand before a sizable number of Dagur's men while Astrid got shoved off to the side (though, she noted with some disgust, many of the Berserks still seemed to be paying more attention to her).

But today, it seemed, Dagur had figured out his plan.

"I've figured out my plan," he boasted to Hiccup and the crowd excitedly, and waited for a response from his victim, as though he expected some terror or fainting.

Hiccup only cracked, "I've heard in some parts of the archipelago three days for a comeback is considered quick-witted."

This provoked a small tantrum from Dagur, which involved stomping his feet and the spraying of enough saliva that Astrid saw Hiccup trying to mop his face with his sleeve. "MY PLAN," he shouted, "IS TO DEFEAT YOU IN ONE-ON-ONE COMBAT." Hiccup shrunk back slightly, and Dagur, now pleased, went on talking and pacing the stage. "The combat will be hand-to-hand, a test of our most basic abilities. If you win, I let you go free. If you lose, you become my slave. I'll use you to bring me wine and cheese and things, it'll be great. Anyway, in this



fight, there will be no weapons, no gadgets," he turned back to Hiccup, "no metalwork of any kind."

Astrid's stomach dropped. The color drained from Hiccup's face, his body went rigid as his eyes slipped downwards.

His prosthetic.

"That's right," Dagur grinned. "We shall fight as what we are: a man, and a crippleâ€"

"\_Or\_ you could fight me, instead!" Astrid roared. She rushed the arena's center and the one-eyed guard who'd been in charge of her made a rather feeble attempt to catch up, but she was fast even with her hands bound, and face-to-face with Dagur before he had time to draw a weapon.

"\_You\_?" spit Dagur.

"Unless you're afraid to fight a girl." His face contorted at this rather obvious but apparently effective taunt, and Astrid kept going, an exaggerated swagger in her tone. "Just \_think\_ how worried Hiccup would be for me, all in dangerâ€"did you know I'm the \_only\_ person he's ever had a terror-based crush on?"

Dagur looked quickly to Hiccup, who didn't seem to be following this particular line of manipulation but nodded anyway. Dagur's face went purple with jealousy. Bingo.

"It is a great act of cowardice to have a woman fight in one's place," he argued, voice trembling. "If Hiccup consentsâ€"

"I consent!" Hiccup cried. "I consent to the act of cowardice. I consent so, so much. I am just, bursting with consentâ€"

"Shut up," Astrid muttered in his direction.

Dagur, whose sense of control was crumbling before him, glanced back and forth between Hiccup and Astrid. Finally, he drew himself up to his full, deranged height, and seethed, "We fight here. One hour. If you lose, Hiccup is still my slave, but you \_die\_."

\_Delightful\_, though Astrid. Hiccup's face fell. The Berserk chief swung on his heel and stomped off, ordering a couple of thugs to take them back to the cell. As soon as Dagur was out of earshot and they were being marched away, Hiccup careened frantically toward her.

"My consent does not extend to you dying, Astrid!"

"You really need to work on your aggression," she said simply. She was feeling determined, focused. Good about this. Nervous, yes, but only enough to energize her adequately.

Hiccup shook his head. "You're underestimating him. He can be stupid but he's got instincts, and he's strong, he used to pummel me as a kidâ€"

"I'm strong too."

The guard tossed them back in the cell, with instructions to prepare



for the fight. Astrid took a seat and started working on loosening her shoulder pads.

"I just think you're being a little rash, is all." He slumped against the wall. "He'd only rough me up a little bit, but you can actually fight back, you're a threat. You're getting between him and me, and he hates it. Let me call the guard, there might still be timeâ€" "

She looked up at him, unmoved. "Hiccup, I know more about defending myself against powerful unarmed men with rage issues than you, or your dad, or anyone of your gender, would ever understand. I'm going to be fine. Just say thank you."

The digestion of her assurance crossed his face in frowns and twitchy eyebrows, until at last he glanced at the ground, and then flopped down beside her. "Okay. Thank you. That was sort of my nightmare."

"I know, mine too." Hiccup gave her a puzzled smile. "Well. I mean. One of them. Not that I care about you, or anything," she coughed awkwardly. Out of the corner of her eye she could see him shaking with silent laughter, and after a beat she laughed too, and they spent the next three-quarters of an hour brainstorming tricky hand combat strategies.

The guard returned and in a few minutes they were back in the arena, only this time Astrid stood centrally before the Berserker forces, and it was Hiccup pushed to the side. She had shed what metal armor remained on her, and as Dagur entered the circle created by spectators (the lumbering, sinister members of the Berserk army), she could see he too came helmetless, bare-shoulder, and without gauntlets. For the first time Dagur's youth was visible to Astrid; he was not three years she and Hiccup's senior, and his manic persona struck her as more skittish and pathetic now that he stood here, stripped of weapons, just a foolish young man entering into an ill-advised fight for reasons of pride and stupidity.

"Okay, girl," he grunted, cracking his knuckles.

"Astrid," she corrected.

Dagur ignored her, and put on his leader-voice, turning to the assembled. "No weapons, gear, or assistance of any kind. This will be a fight to the surrender, or more likely, a fight to the death." He tossed Astrid an unsettling grin; the disillusionment caused by his lack of armor dissipated, and she saw again a boy who'd killed his father for the sake of power. "If the girl wins, she and the Dragon Master go free. If I win, I get a new \_toy\_ to play with," he said gleefully, eyeing Hiccup (who looked as though he grew less clueless about Dagur's interest in him by the second), and then he spoke to Astrid again. "May the best man win. Do you think you can fight like a man?"

She replied pleasantly, "I don't know why I'd want to when a man's about to lose."

"GO," Dagur screeched, and launched himself at her like a flying brick. Reflexes, however, were a point of pride for Astrid, and she sidestepped the attack thoughtlessly, sending the Berserk boy



stumbling to recover his balance and reorient himself. When Dagur was sure-footed again, he made an identical pass at her, but swung to the right just as she dodged the charge. He barreled into her and they hit the ground hardâ€”Astrid tasted metal and felt the stone floor on her back, then quickly kneed him in the groin, earning a squeal from her opponent. She scrambled to extract herself from beneath Dagur in the precious seconds of his distraction, and then fled to the other side of the circle, crouched in anticipation of his next move.

The voice in her head chanted, Move defensively. Move a lot. Demand exertion. Conserve strength. She focused on catching her breath.

"Running away," wheezed Dagur, glaring at her as he got to his feet. "Don't want to fight anymore?"

But Astrid only gestured for him to come at her.

On his third charge, he wrapped his arms around Astrid's torso and lifted her, and she hollered in surprise. She spent some time suspended off the ground, pounding on Dagur's back, like a disobedient child at the mercy of her father, until she had rather a bright idea and bit him hard on the soft skin beneath his armpit. Another scream, and she found herself on her feet again, dodging punches that came each with grunts of effort. Demand exertion. Go for the eyes.

So she shoved her fingers in his eye as hard as she could, feeling the collision of gummy flesh with her nails, and Dagur stumbled back shrieking. Here was her chance.

Astrid hooked her foot around his ankle and pulled as he floundered, and with a thud Dagur landed writhing on his back. She pounced on him, her foot across his windpipe, pressing down. His wriggling arms attempted to pry her off at first, then slowed as she increased pressure, big hateful eyes drilling into her own, the left still red and half-shut. Blood pounded in her ears, almost drowning out the sound of the Berserks who watched, though for the first time in several minutes she could hear the panicked shouts of onlookers.

"What's my name?" she demanded of Dagur, though he could barely speak. He had his weak hands around her ankle and pawed at it, spluttering dumbly. She applied another half-inch of pressure, and the look in his eyes grew frantic, scared. "My name," she said again, and his lips started trying to form something. Another half-inch. He squirmed harder beneath her, her foot grew heavier on his throat, and she wanted to throw her whole weight on it, to leave him bleeding in the dirt. She did not understand why this desire consumed her in that moment, only that she saw clearly the future in which no one ever called her girl or Hiccup cripple.

"Astrid!" came a scream from far off, not the cry of a Berserk, but the plea of a voice she knew well, a weird tenor. Startled, she scanned the crowd, and found Hiccup staring at the scene in dismay. After a moment, it occurred to herâ€”he did not want her to kill Dagur. Her head began to spin, and she eased some of her weight off her foot. Astrid was a Viking of the old order. Now able to speak, Dagur choked, "Astridâ€”mercy."



But there was little time for her to make an important philosophical decision, because not a second after Dagur's plea, a ball of light streaked over their heads and the great wooden door to the arena—the only exit—burst into flames.

The Berserk army started yelling all at once, and before Astrid knew it, Dagur was gone from beneath her feet and she was being pushed around by a crowd of stampeding Berserks, and then she was—flying, the familiar sensation of a dragon's talons supporting her arms. When she was brought back down away from the fray, it was Stormfly who landed beside her.

She didn't have time to be surprised, or appreciative, or impressed; she threw herself on the dragon's back and declared, "Let's get Hiccup, girl."

Said Hiccup was at that moment trying to talk down a bunch of fighters trampling the ground near him in panic, explaining in an agitated tone, "See, guys, the fire isn't going to spread because the arena is made of stone, so if you'd just take a couple deep breaths—" Alas, he didn't get to tell them what would come after those deep breaths, because he was then in air, carried by Stormfly and Astrid, who fled the Berserk arena through an opening in its barred roof. Wide wings lifted them well above the island, though to Astrid's surprise and disappointment, they didn't start toward Berk. But as Stormfly descended toward a side of the island distant from the Berserk camp, she realized she would not have to wait for a reunion. From below Stormfly, she heard Hiccup whooping.

Moored there in the snug safety of an inlet sat the entirety of the Hooligan fleet, and circling above them were three (or three-and-a-half, depending on who you asked) dragons and their four waving riders.

\* \* \*

><p>AN: Just a heads up that if I don't respond to your comment, I'm fully appreciative of whatever you have to say—I am reading all of them, but I'm swamped right now with the start of the semester; every precious free moment I have is spent writing, and it still took me two weeks to do this chapter—| so I hope to get to more comments this weekend, and please expect the next chapter in 1-2 weeks!

### 3. You Are Getting To An Age

A/N: Time is starting to progress in this one. Also, I'm getting a little meatier. I do plan to expand on some of the secondary characters eventually, but the story's about Astrid, so that will have to wait for now. The good news is, things are starting to happen, romantic stylez.

\* \* \*

><p>That afternoon they prepared to sail home on Stoick's ship, and Hiccup lied with such confidence that if Astrid hadn't known the whole humiliating truth of the situation, she might've believed him herself.<p>

"So you're saying," Gobber said after a long hush, "they had got it



in their heads that Astrid here was the living embodiment of a goddessâ€"

"Freya," Hiccup specified.

"â€and the Berserks decided to capture her and make her their patronâ€"

"They started a temple and everything, we saw it," he insisted.

Gobber stroked his straw-like moustache. "And where do you come in?"

Hiccup faltered, like he had forgotten to account for this factor in his complex fib.

"Wellâ€| you know," he began shiftily, and Astrid stepped forward.

"We were together when I was taken!" Stoick, who'd been listening impassively to his son's explanation, stirred at this, and Gobber raised a bushy eyebrow. At first Astrid couldn't place their reaction, but she caught a glimpse of the expression on Hiccup's face. "Practicing," she amended hastily. "Skirmishing, we were skirmishing? Sometimes, we do that, late at night, becauseâ€|" She gave Hiccup a pleading look, her lying skills overextended.

"We're very competitive," Hiccup offered brightly. "Old rivals. Sometimes we go for hours, just completely lose track of time."

"Huh-huh, yeah," Tuffnut sniggered from the gunwale, and Ruffnut guffawed. Astrid gestured rudely at the pair of them.

"Well," said Stoick, exchanging a skeptical glance with Gobber. "Interesting tale, son. We'll have to keep an eye on these gods-fearing Berserks." Astrid stifled a sigh; she didn't think they'd be hearing the last of this.

Hiccup coughed and nodded, and the chief started giving orders for the fleet to move out. The riders mounted their dragons for the flight home to Berk, Astrid instinctively offering Hiccup a hand up on to Stormfly's back.

"Did they really think you were Freya?" Fishlegs asked, breathless from hauling himself on to Meatlug.

"Only Snotlout would be dumb enough to believe that," Tuffnut declared, and Hookfang's head burst into flame when his master glared at Tuff.

"I'm not dumb, shut up!"

"Your butt's on fire again," Tuff observed and, panicked and smoking heavily, Snotlout made a quick detour off the side of the boat, into the chilly sea.

The twins watched him fall, grinning, and then Ruffnut continued, "Yeah, we all thought it was just because they thought you were



Hiccup's girlfriend."

"\_What?" \_demanded Astrid and Hiccup in unison, the latter so startled he slipped from Stormfly and floundered back on to the deck. Astrid visualized jumping in after Snotlout.

"Someone told Trader Johann that and now the entire archipelago thinks so," Ruffnut explained happily.

"\_You\_ told him that," Tuffnut corrected.

Her face lit up. "That's \_right\_, I did! Awesome, I totally forgot. I'm hilarious."

"That was very," Hiccup huffed, climbing back onto Stormfly, "â€"irresponsible, Ruff, someone could have wanted to hurt Astrid, you can't just going around saying stuff like that!"

"What! Astrid doesn't even \_care\_."

Astrid had indeed been sitting in silence as the conversation progressed around her, her knuckles white from gripping the pommel of her saddle. Now everyone stared at her, even Snotlout, who'd clamored back on to the deck. They were waiting for a judgment.

She said leisurely, "I'm just deciding how I'm going to kill you." Everyone seemed to take this response in stride, since over the years death threats had become just Astrid being Astrid, and even Ruff waved it off, but as Hiccup settled into the seat behind her she saw him flinch. She'd almost forgottenâ€"the events of just an hour ago felt distant and otherworldly. She remembered the sensation of her boot on Dagur's throat, and nudged Stormfly forward. "We're going!" The dragon, sensing her master's discomfort, shot into the air and away from the ship so abruptly that Hiccup hugged her waist in an effort not to slide off.

To her relief, Stormfly left the other riders well behind, and they soared in silence until Berserker Island was a speck at their backs. She struggled to batten down the irritating shame that came with Hiccup's disapproval, or disgust, or whatever it was that had caused him to call out to her in the arena; a lump of conflicted emotion formed in her throat and she had to swallow it, or go madâ€"her conscience and her inclination toward defiance were locked in a tug-of-war, and around there somewhere lurked consciousness of her feelings about Hiccup, and a frustration with the problem those feelings posed to her understanding of the world, a Viking's world.

See, here was a time it would've been easier to be angry. She did not care to go wading through the muddy waters of her mind; she'd opt to drain the swamp, if she could.

"Why'd you lie?" she asked Hiccup bluntly, after the need for a distraction grew urgent.

"Figured you wouldn't want to keep dealing with it."

"You're not wrong."

Stormfly dipped toward the sea, causing Hiccup's hands to shift on



her waist. She hadn't noticed them there; it'd been months since they'd had to fly like this, but it came back to her naturally. She wondered if he felt that same physical ease—a nice contrast to the challenge in her head.

"So," said Hiccup experimentally. She shut her eyes.

"So?"

There was something to be said between them, and they both knew it, and neither of them wanted to let it go unsaid, because that kind of silence carved deserts out of plentitude, left permanent schisms, drained you of trust and sympathy. To lose her friend again, having only just got him back, would frustrate Astrid, but finding a way to talk about what had happened seemed like an insurmountable obstacle. Even Hiccup, who was better with words than any Viking had the precedence to be, sat there in foiled silence.

What was the problem? If she could get her head around that, maybe the solution would follow.

She began by reckoning, "We're different, Hiccup."

"I know," he sighed.

"It's not a bad thing," she said, surprised at his tone. "It makes us work better together. Even if you're confusing, sometimes."

"I'm confusing?" he repeated. She couldn't see his face, but his voice was grinning.

"You know what I mean." On the horizon appeared soaring spiral cliffs; they were nearing home. "Remember that night we got captured, on the boat, when I said I thought we were going to change Berk forever?"

"And then you remembered we already have?"

Astrid smiled, and spoke carefully. "It's still happening. It's going to take a little getting used to, I think. For someone like me. Some things come harder than others." She glanced back at him, but only saw the corner of his mouth, twitching up. "Will you bear with me while I figure it out?" This was a fair thing to ask, since she'd done the same for him, and in a big way.

She felt his chin come to rest on her shoulder, and exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Yeah, Astrid," he said. "I'll bear with you."

Squirmy again, in the pit of her stomach, but her arms were lighter too—a very odd feeling. "Thanks."

Hiccup nodded, the motion rubbing her shoulder, absurd and pleasant. A minute ticked by; he didn't move, she didn't mind. Then, struck by a thought, he tensed and leaned confidentially into her ear.

"Astrid?"

"Mhm?"



"Do you think Dagur has a crush on me?"

The wind swallowed her laughter, and they descended into the village.

Phlegma stood in the doorway when Astrid arrived home. She said only, "Hello, daughter," and then went to sit by the hearth with her mead. Their argument of the night she'd disappeared was neither forgotten nor resolved, it seemed. Astrid retreated to her room; it felt like eons had passed since she'd lain in her own bed without fear. Even if Ruffnut's idiotic rumor persisted, and she would be attacked again tomorrow, she felt secure. Stronger. It didn't seem like the foolish bravado of youth, thinking she could handle whatever came her way.

And yet there were different securities to be traded for that confidence. She had a sense that she would need to start over, now, like she had learned a strategy inside-out and finally seen its weakness—the realization necessitated a new approach, so she was left bereft, and not just because she'd lost her shoulder pads. And then there was Hiccup: they were okay, they were better than they had been in a year, they were closer and plainer to each other than they had been in their lives, but Astrid couldn't shake the look on his face as she'd stood over Dagur. That scene played her into sleep, and she dreamed she was in Dagur's place, her own boot across her throat.

She woke at dawn the next morning, having drifted off early. She expected to find Berk silent, but at the bottom of the stairs sat her mother at their dining table, waiting.

"Astrid. Please sit."

So Astrid sat, if reluctantly. She could hear Stormfly squawking in her stall, could see it was a sunny day. She didn't want to begin it like this.

"Are you all right?" asked Phlegma.

"You didn't ask me that last night."

"Does that upset you?"

Did it? Astrid frowned. "You're my mom. You're supposed to be concerned."

"I apologize," she replied, with infuriating simplicity. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Astrid grunted.

It was quiet for half a minute. Astrid thought about leaving, though she had not been dismissed. What else could her mother have to say?

"You are getting to an age, Astrid," her mother finally began, "where you may feel you have a limited prime in which to enjoy your freedom. Have you begun to think about marriage, and children?"

"No," Astrid lied.



"But you will, because that is the way the world is for us." Phlegma sighedâ€"a rare crack in her steely exterior, making Astrid's stomach flip. "What you should know is that there is no such thing as necessity in these situations. You have a choice. Your father is gone, and I won't stand in your way. Take your time. Do what you want and it won't seem like such a burden to grow older."

"Was it a burden for you?" she blurted, and blushed, but the curiosity was intense. She couldn't understand what her mother was saying without some biographical explanation.

Phlegma stared at her, and then answered, "It is now."

Astrid nodded and her eyes fell to her feet. Her father had died when she was six years old, but if she imagined losing Hiccupâ€"or any of her friendsâ€"she sensed it was a wound that not ten nor twenty nor a hundred years could heal.

"Good morning," said Phlegma in dismissal, and Astrid left the house quietly.

After greeting Stormfly, she walked to the arena and stood feeling the sun on her face, fighting the cold of the air; with no weapon to her name, the sensation was one of nudity. She fought the hypothetical fear in her gullet at such exposure.

"You need a new axe," called Hiccup. He had appeared in the stands, sitting with his chin on his fist.

"How long have you been there?"

"Not long. I just was wondering why you weren't drilling, and then I remembered. Come to the forge?"

She shrugged, and went to meet him at the exit. They walked to his work in no particular hurry: there was only a short session at the academy today, and then nothing. They had trained so hard for the past few months, they were beginning to exhaust their educational material. Soon Hiccup and Fishlegs would've imparted all the knowledge they could, and then it would be time to foster a new generation of students. She hadn't thought deeply about being a teacher in this second academy, but maybe on the days they did Naddersâ€"other than that, her future seemed wide open. A frighteningly blank canvas. \_That\_ part of her mother's speech made sense, at least.

Inside, Hiccup got out some parchment and charcoal and began to sketch an axe, pausing every so often for her input. The resultant design was not so different from her lost double-headed weapon, but it would have slightly more weight, and some small insets toward the center. He then proceeded to measure her for new shoulder pads and leather wrist guards, and finally, a rabbit's fur hood. "For the winter," he explained, scribbling the measurements in his notebook, which gave her a few seconds to recover from the disconcertion of being so overwhelmingly cared-about.

Finished, he snapped the book shut and pinned his sketches to the wall. "Okay, I'll start them later today."



"Thanks," she said. He had rather a lot of papers lying around his drafting table, and she'd been trying to get a better look at some of them. She spied a large diagram, of what looked like a sword hilt with some kind of compartment for cartridges, but a preoccupied Hiccup swept the papers away.

"You're very welcome," he chirped, and started to rummage beneath the drafting table where they sat. "Now, next on the agendaâ€"

"Agenda?" she echoed skeptically.

"Yes!" He popped back up, a rectangular wooden box in his hands. "Our agenda. We're partners now, we have to collaborate in everything we do."

"We couldn't have collaborated on making the agenda?"

"It's open to suggestion." He waved a hand to move them on. "I've got to show you what I've been working on." Preciously, he opened the box, and withdrew what at first she thought was a stack of papers, but as he unfolded it across the table there was only a single large parchment, the painstaking lines across it forming familiar shapes. A map. "Well, when I say I've been working on it, I really mean me and Toothless. It's a group effort." There was Berk, in careful detail, surrounded by small sketches of its native dragons. She recognized Dragon Island, the homes of the Berserks and the Outcasts, the island where she liked to clear her head (had Hiccup been there?), in accurate and definitive arrangement.

"Wow," she murmured, leaning in to get a closer look. "How long did this take you?"

Hiccup laughed, with a nervous twinge. "How long has it been since I stopped being around?" Smiling, she traced the outline of Berk. "We would go out for hours, and I'd sketch whatever I saw. It was amazing, there's so much to see. But it's not finished," he added quickly, as Astrid hadn't been able to squash her look of disappointed exclusion. "I've barely even touched most of the archipelago, there's a huge chain of islands to the northeast that's all going to need to be explored. And that doesn't even include cataloging the local dragon species. The whole thing could take years." Sheepish, Hiccup nudged the map in her direction, and Astrid's stomach gave a little flip. "So, if you've got a free afternoon, maybe sometimeâ€"

"Yes!" It came out with more force than she expected, and off of Hiccup's amused grin, she shrunk a little. "I mean, that sounds fun. I'll check my schedule."

"Okay. That's good. Check your schedule," he laughed.

Her heart was beating very fast, and it struck her as strange, to be so thrilled at the prospect of mapmaking. Maps fell under the category of nerdery that also included Fishlegs' class-this-or-that memorized blathering about dragon species and Hiccup's affinity for wasting his skill in design on public works improvements (even if the fire prevention stuff worked all right); generally, if a scientific endeavor lacked the allure of eventually fighting someone or flying her dragon, she distanced herself from it. But this mapâ€it felt



private and important. There again was that sense of privilege she got with Hiccup, sometimes, but broader. This couldn't be the important thing they did for Berk, not a \_map\_, but what if it were part of it?

She smoothed her hands across the paper, and then took a deep breath. "I want to add something to the agenda.

"Yeah?"

"Our Saturday flights. Can we do that again?"

Hiccup's mouth hung open briefly, and then he said, "Yeah. Sure! That's it? Not going to use me for target practice or anything?"

"That'sâ€"that's it, yes, but it'sâ€"|" She stumbled, but folded her arms across her chest determinedly. "It's just important, okay?"

"Okay, Astrid," Hiccup beamed, like he knew something she didn't. She wanted to wipe that look off his face, so she punched him in the gut, sending him halfway from his stool to the floor. "Why would you \_do\_ that?" he squeaked, trying to pull himself back to his seat.

"Another thing for the agenda," she announced, lurching across the table before he could stop her, "is that I get to see that sword you're planning."

"NO!"

"Yes!" She snatched the papers out of his reach, and strode across the forge with him on her tail, examining them. "It's a flaming sword, but how are you doing that? 'The Dragon Blade,' kind of a lame name."

"Lame! It's not lame, it'sâ€"it's Zippleback gas, the blade's telescopic and itâ€" it coats it. There's a thumb lighter!" He frowned deeply, and fell back into his seat. "Do you really think it's lame?"

Astrid snorted. "Just the name. Cheer up, a flaming sword sounds amazing. A good weapon reflects the person carrying it, and this one isâ€" nerdy but also impressive, so." He did cheer up, and fast. "But you need a better name. Something short and intimidating." Astrid wheeled around to face him, slapping the sketch back on the table. "I knowâ€" \_Inferno\_."

"Inferno," he repeated thoughtfully, gazing at his hand like he envisioned the blade there.

Astrid had made her decision. "Inferno is perfect. When are you going to start it?"

Hiccup deflated, and pulled the papers away from her. "It's just an idea."

"A good idea," she persisted, and then added, with uphill work, "You have good ideas." What about this exactly made her feel so stupid?



Was it the meekness in her voice, or the compliment itself, which rang limp and insufficient? Hiccup was staring at her, just openly, like a freak, but not like a freak, because she didn't think he was a freak anymore, did she? She'd found better words to describe his unique deal. But the stare he gave her made her feel like a freak, and an instinct made her want to hurl the insult back in his direction.

"Astrid," he started, urgency in his voice—"she could sense something heavy or difficult on the tip of his tongue. He would ask something big, something emotional, something that demanded a sworn answer, something that ventured into her head by an avenue she had yet to discover. He would ask her the same kind of question he was always asking himself, and she would have to remind him again that they were different.

"Show me another idea," she demanded quickly. He paused, shaking his head, and so she sat back down at the table. "Come on. We've got an hour before training. Show me something cool." She gestured to his notebook, which sat by him, its spine busting and frayed, the leafed pages crowded and well loved.

Hiccup wrung his hands—"he wanted to ask his question, but she would have no answer, not now, so she gave him a smile that requested a little more time—"or tried to, the nuance challenged her. If anything, there was obviously a plea to drop it that he couldn't ignore. Finally, he exhaled and plopped down next to her. "Show you something cool, okay."

Astrid breathed a sigh, and nodded, watching him flick through papers with a little frown that knitted his eyebrows together. There was a word for the look on his face but, when that word came to her, she was too embarrassed to repeat it, even privately. She fidgeted and tried to concentrate on a sketch he'd laid out before him. It looked like a drawing of Toothless's wings, but with a smaller span, and some arrows going all around them.

Hiccup tapped the paper. "Here. I'm studying flight mechanics, how dragons stay in the air."

"Huh." She squinted at the diagram a second time. "The arrows are the air, then?"

"Right, they track the direction of the air flow around the dragon's wings," he replied, thrilled by her comprehension. "And then," he grabbed another bunch of papers, "once you understand that, you can see that gliding is the aspect of flight that requires the least mechanical output—"there's no pumping." A second diagram and a third and then a fourth appeared in front of her, different from the first—"here was a drawing of a person, wearing some kind of dragon get-up.

"What is that?"

Hiccup mumbled something—"she saw he'd turned bright red.

"What is it?" she repeated, trying not to laugh.

"A flying suit," he said hopelessly. "Gods, I knew this was stupid. Why did I think this wasn't stupid? Am I stupid? I'm stupid." He was



trying to drag all the sketches together while simultaneously lying across them so she couldn't see.

"A flight suit? Like for you? Waitâ€¦" She pushed him off and examined at the diagrams againâ€¦"yes, they did look like somewhat wishful self-portraits, and there wereâ€¦ wings. Sort of. She tried to imagine the suit in use, and instantly dropped the paper. "Are you planning on jumping off of Toothless?"

Hiccup, eyes on the ceiling, raised his hands and shrugged noncommittally. She returned the gesture, but with a very pointed glare.

"That is insane," she told him. "You are crazy."

"I thought you liked me being crazy," he said, looking hopeful. Okay, she had goaded him into craziness, once or twice. When he needed it! Did he really need to jump off a dragon five hundred feet above the ocean? No, he certainly did not.

Then again.

Would it have been kind of cool, if he pulled it off?

Yes. Yes it would.

Astrid stuck out her chin. "Okay."

"Okay?" Hiccup's eyebrows shot up.

"I think you should try it. Do you have the suit made?"

It didn't seem like he'd expected the conversation to go in this direction. "Uhâ€¦ well, no, it's just an idea, I'm not even sure ifâ€¦"

"Make a prototype. I'll come with you. That way if you die horribly there'll be someone to tell your dad how dumb you were being." She grinned at him, an expression he returned reluctantly at first, and then sensing her sincere interest, with a genuine smile.

"You're bossy, Astrid," he said delightedly.

She scowled. "What's wrong with that? One day it'll be your job to be bossy."

"There's nothing wrong with it. Not one thing. You're right."

This was a strange answer; she cleared her throat, and got up from the table. "You should be taking notes. Let's go find Stormfly and Toothless, I think I hear dragons."

Hiccup and Astrid would leave for their Saturday morning flights, and the twins would laugh while Snotlout grumbled and Fishlegs wished them a fun trip (and the twins would laugh again); when they landed home a few hours later, Stoick always managed to be lurkingâ€¦as much as Stoick ever lurked, it was more like standing about importantly with himâ€¦in the village square, wordlessly awaiting their return. He'd look at the pair with a deliberately veiled expression, and then thunder off to the Great Hall for mead or council meetings, leaving



Hiccup to shrug apologetically at her on his behalf. People watched them talk to each other out of the corner of their eyes, no matter how mundane the conversation. He brought her new axe to the arena a couple of weeks after they came back from Berserker Island, and a small crowd materialized to watch her test it out, or to watch him watching her test it out. It was weirdâ€”when they were alone together on flights they'd make jokes about the phenomenon, but neither of them really knew what the punchline was. Joking felt like the simplest way to acknowledge and disregard it.

To her intense relief, Phlegma had succeeded in righting Ruffnut's unfortunate rumor, and Astrid could once again roam Berk and the surrounding isles in relative safety.

And she did, alone and with Hiccup. After he'd taught her the basics of mapmaking she could go off and take her own notes when she pleased, though more than once they'd crossed paths on solo flights and ended up exploring together beyond their weekly arrangement. They developed an unspoken rule to stagger their arrivals back to Berk after these accidental meetings; reasoning served no purpose when their agreement was absolute.

The harbors froze over. Her new hood was rabbit's fur: she hunted the hides herself, and Hiccup had done strong work, he was as good with leather and fur as he was with metal; the garment warmed her even when it was down. He'd pack them small lunches of salted cod and bread and they'd fly out to wherever they were charting and picnic on the solid sea.

It was good to be friends again. It was even easy, when they were on their own, talking and exploring, and not in contention with the Berkian staring. She tried not to think too hard about what her mother had said, not such a maid after all. In fact, she aggressively ignored the possibility someone might jump to any conclusions about her maidenhead, and spent as much time as she liked with Hiccup in bold rejection of propriety; it was the only way she could think to fight what seemed like the as yet stupidest burden offered by her womanhood. No one seemed to be worried about Hiccup's virginity, though part of that might've been Hiccup being Hiccup. Like he had an innate sense of honor or something. Which made Astrid, what? Dis\_honorable? Pah.

This was the general spin of her complaint when all the aggressive ignorance and bold rejection of propriety came back to bite her in the butt.

"No," Phlegma told her flatly, not glancing up.

"Butâ€”"

"Day trips are one thing. Overnight is unacceptable." Her mother was in the process of packing a trunk for her next tripâ€”it had been almost two months since she'd cut short her voyage to return home and help Astrid. It was January and the seas would be rough, but Berk needed supplies.

"But we've found a new island, and it's impossible to make the round trip in a day any get any good exploring done, we're only going to camp out for a few hours while it's darkâ€”"



"You have your answer, daughter."

"It's for \_Berk\_," she pleaded, as though this were the most important, legitimizing reason in the world, inarguable. "Nothing is going to happen!"

Phlegma at last turned to look at her daughter, and said coolly, "You know very well it doesn't matter what happens. It only matters what could."

"That's not fair."

"You're right, it's not."

Her mother said this so plainly, without any anger at all, that Astrid saw red for a moment. Here stood Phlegma in armor, an axe on her back, preparing to lead an expedition that had been led by men for a hundred years before her tenure, but she couldn't manage a little rage at this obvious injustice? Her mother had not always been there for her, but she had at least instilled Astrid with the belief that she could be just as good as any boy, as long as she worked hard. And Astrid had worked \_hard\_.

She tried to temper her breathing, to calm herself. "You told me to do what I want. Remember?"

"This is not like that, dear. Some things you cannot change."

"I'll change them," she declared.

"But not today," Phlegma replied, definitively. She went back to packing; the conversation was over. Astrid rocked back on her heels, and stomped out of the house, beaten but not bested.

She met Hiccup in the cove, where he was sorting through some provisionsâ€”probably for their trip, and she gritted her teeth. Toothless was rolling around happily in some mud nearby.

"Stop that, bud," Hiccup groaned, not seeing her approach. "You're getting it all over the saddle, I have to sit on thatâ€”Astrid!"

She had appeared next to him, scowling. "Hi."

At the expression on her face, he asked weakly, "Did you talk to your mom?"

"Yeah." Something blue streaked over their heads, and Stormfly settled down near Toothless, who leapt up to greet her. "She said no." Hiccup's head tilted to the side, watching their dragons interact. "I don't care," Astrid blurted out. "She's leaving on her trip tomorrow. We'll just go anyway, you tell your dad you're going on your own, and we can make it seem like I'm home alone."

Hiccup appeared to consider this for a moment, and then asked, "Why'd she say you couldn't go, again?"

"Stupid reasons," Astrid replied. He gave her an expectant look, and she groaned, starting to pace. "She says I can't be alone with you overnight, even though I told her nothing is going to happen, and then she said it only matters how it looks, and I said, 'How dumb is



that?' and she said it is dumb but it doesn't matter, I've still go to do it. She says I can't change things today, or whatever." Astrid flopped down on to a rock.

"Everyone's going to know you're gone if Stormfly isn't in her stall," Hiccup pointed out. She gave him a glare that said, decidedly, you're not helping. He bit his lip and went to sit beside her. "Listen, if we get caught sneaking off, it's going to look ten times worse than if we go with permission. Why don't we just ask Fishlegs or someone to come with us?"

"Because the map is our thing, Hiccup!" she said desperately, enough that he glanced away, over to whether Toothless and Stormfly had paused a game of chase to observe their masters. "I don't want to have to make excuses for that, it's not right. I'll be seventeen in a few weeks. I'm an adult."

"It's not right," he agreed, but there was a thought he wasn't sharing, she could see it in the tiny line between his brows.

"What?"

Hiccup hesitated, and she punched him in the arm. "Okay, okay! I was just going to say, not likeâ€¦ well, if you want it to be just us, I'm not saying we necessarilyâ€¦we've been spending a lot of time together, lately, and I haven't really been sure what thatâ€¦ what youâ€¦"

"Hiccup," Astrid grumbled, attempting to sound disgruntled through the blush starting up on her face.

"I'm justâ€¦I mean, I don't know what you're thinking becauseâ€¦" He got up, rubbing the back of his neck, and meandered toward Toothless. "Well, because you won't tell me. Which is your right, completely! But I was thinking, maybe the way it looks isn'tâ€¦ so far off, from the truth. For me, at least," he finished awkwardly.

"Hiccup," she said again, this time failing to hide her embarrassment. She really only had the gist of what he was saying, but it had turned her bright red anyway, and glued her in place. He'd had to go and complicate her war on injustice withâ€¦ with this! (This was the look on his face just then as she sat there blushing and not saying a word excepting his name, a flabbergasted look, of terror and shocking stark candor, wrenching her heart more than a little.)

Startled by her silence, which she realized too late probably sounded as rejection, he started gesticulating wildly. "Ah, yeah, guess I did something stupid again? Or was this one crazy? Hey, maybe it was both. Amazing! Well, at least we know the trip's not happening, ha, I guess I'll be going now." He did a silly little bow and tripped off toward Toothless, which got Astrid on her feet, finally, in anticipation of what was about to happen.

"Don't you dare leave this cove, Hiccup Haddock!" she shouted, but he was already on Toothless, waving at her so he wouldn't have to meet her eye.

Toothless gave a small puzzled kick, looking back and forth between



Hiccup in the saddle and Astrid charging toward them, but when his master gave him the command he shot upwards, with Hiccup crying, "Bye, Astrid!" as he disappeared above her head.

Through the beat of silence that followed, Stormfly and Astrid looked at one another, the dragon wiggling invitingly, ready to continue the game of chase, and a determined, manic grin crossed Astrid's face; a leap and a bound later, they were in the air, a bullet following after.

\* \* \*

><p>AN: I wrote this quickly, didn't I? Probably don't expect another chapter until this weekend. Whoops!

#### 4. They Get Busy

A/N: A few thingsâ€”firstly, thanks for all the lovely reviews and faves and follows and whatnot. As always they're very encouraging. Secondly, there is a lot of talking in this chapter but also some doing, hopefully all entertaining. Thirdly, I think I may end up temporarily switching POV for the next chapter or part of it. That might make more sense after you've read this one, but be prepared for the possibility. And lastly, I just wanted to put out there that I think this fic will be anywhere from 7-12 chapters, but if the interest is there I'll do a second half that's post-HTTYD2. Mainly because, Valka and Astrid? Yeah. Here for it. Okay, enough, here's a chapter.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid had been pursuing Hiccup for twenty minutes to no avail when the air around her went gray and dense: they had flown right into a storm.<p>

He'd started out north, turning around and waving to call her off, but in spite of Toothless's speed and the declining weather Astrid gave one hell of a chase. Now she was shadowing the occasional glimpse of a red tailfin through the thick cloud coverâ€”whatever kind of storm this was, it felt more like dust than the cold dewiness of a raincloud, and she began to cough, eyes streaming. Vikings were no strangers to the damp, and she'd flown through a fair amount of mist in her life, but this was dry mistâ€”not really mist at all. It was now too dusty to see the tip of Stormfly's nose, let alone make out Hiccup. Astrid pulled her hood up and leaned low over her dragon's neck, trying to shield her face from the harsh air, and screamed for him as loud as she could. Stormfly slowed, writhing nervously beneath her.

After a moment of fearful listening, she heard him.

"ASTRID? ARE YOU OKAY?"

"Yes!" she shouted at the wall of gray surrounding her. "I can't see anything."

"Stay where you are, I'll come to your voice." A moment later, the end of a rope flew out of the nothingness. "Did you get the rope?" he asked, now sounding much closer.



She latched on to it before it slid away. "Yes, I have it, I have the rope!"

"Tie it to your saddle, it'll tether us together. Then we can try to get below whatever this is and land somewhere." Her hands shook, slowing the progress of her knot.

"It's done."

"Okay. Lower, bud."

Astrid stroked Stormfly's neck. "Lower, girl."

The two dragons flapped downwards in unison—maybe they had some special sense that helped them pinpoint each other's locations without sight. Instead, she had only an inkling that Hiccup flew near, only an inadequate feeling that he was okay, frustrating for Astrid who worked best with the tangible.

Minutes passed before the cloud cover started to thin and she could see the outline of Hiccup and Toothless, hovering twenty feet from them. The journey down had left them a stone's throw from the surface of the sea. They were joined by the tether, which he started to cut, but she raised a hand. "Leave it. Just in case."

Hiccup nodded. He had that look of shaken strength in his eyes, staring up at the cloud in wonder and disconcertion. "We need to land and let this thing pass."

"Back to Berk?"

"No, we're leagues from Berk now, we were moving pretty fast before we hit the cloud." He pointed to the horizon, where a tiny, probably unnamed island stuck out of the water. More like a few trees parked on a dirty rock than an island, really. "There."

She gestured her agreement and they set out across the ocean, Stormfly's talons skimming the waves. The layer of strange dust crept further towards the earth, crushing them into the surface. The sky had been swallowed up, reduce to a sliver of clear air between them and the island. It made Astrid shiver, and wrap her hands around the rope that connected her to Hiccup.

When they reached land and dismounted, the air was still cloudy, and the dragons began to snort and stomp at the dust in their lungs, but the ground comforted her nevertheless. She went to Hiccup's side at once, but he was trying to look out, his expression consternated. "It's bizarre," he muttered. "I can't see a thing. What's doing this?"

Tugging at her mind, through the layer of fear and surprise (what was more helpless than not being able to see five feet in front of you?), was the conversation they'd been having before this catastrophe cropped up. Scared or not, they were stuck on this island until the foul weather cleared, and if Hiccup thought he could escape her—could escape her—Okay, so admittedly she hadn't really had a plan for when she caught him! She only knew that it was important for her to do so, and that she would—figure it out as she went along. Didn't seem like it would be too hard: there was nothing negative in



what she felt, unless you counted anxiety that he'd try to recant what he said, or humdrumming about the future, both of which were drowned out by adrenaline and the depressing vacancy of her lips. She almost felt relieved that he'd been the one to put it out there, so she didn't have to—"confessions were never really her forte.

"Hiccup," she said quietly, standing behind him as he peered out beyond the island's sheer edge. His hair stuck out in all directions, made stiff by the dust; she thought her own must've looked dreadful, coarse as it felt, and she knew her eyes were red and puffy. The dragons had stilled and were curled up together, Toothless trying to cover his nostrils with his feet and then forgetting to breathe from his mouth, while his master prattled on.

"I think the whole cloud must go a thousand feet up, it's unreal. It's probably going to reach the village eventually, and Thor help us then, who knows how—" "

"Hiccup," she said again, louder.

"It's barely clearing," he continued, clueless, shaking his head. "We'll have to pray the North Wind isn't strong tonight, maybe it'll get carried west."

With a sigh, she wheeled him around by the tunic and planted a kiss hard against his lips, then let go as she pulled away—"though pulling away turned into something more like idling inches from his mouth to get a glimpse of his expression, without precluding the possibility of more. It looked like she'd managed to wipe his mind of dust clouds and North Winds.

"Astrid," he mumbled, careening toward her, and their lips met a second time, more by the nature of gravity than either of their individual wills. Seconds ticked by and they were still kissing, then harder—"the first time she had ever really kissed Hiccup, instead of just teasing it. They had their arms around each other, a closeness provoked by the danger of the situation and the inviting absence where there had once been a wall between them, preventing just this kind of thing. Ranked among the few kisses she'd had, it was mind-blowing. Earth-shattering. Ground-shaking. Sky-shaking. Tree-shaking.

Wait.

They parted and the shaking didn't stop. The dragons flopped and squawked, squealing—"the island beneath them shuddered again and again, and Astrid tried to reach out for Stormfly with one arm while clinging to Hiccup with the other.

"What's going on?"

He shook his head, wide-eyed. No idea. They went about trying to calm the dragons, shoulder-to-shoulder—"she didn't want to lose touch.

"Should we try to fly somewhere else?" she yelled over the rumbling under their feet.

"The visibility is still impossible, we have to stay here."



A searing heat materialized on her upper arm and, crying out, she flinched away from it, right into Hiccup, a smoking gray flake drifting to the ground where she'd stood. Where it had touched her there was a stinging red welt. "Ash," she gasped. They frowned at each other, her arm coiling around his—"now there were little streams of smoke falling all around them like hail.

Above their heads extended two wings, one black and the other splotched blue, orange and purple; Hiccup and Astrid fell cross-legged to the cold ground, with Stormfly and Toothless lying on either side to keep the ash off their masters, purring umbrellas. The earth continued to rumble and groan, and Astrid kept Hiccup's hand firmly in hers.

"It's a volcano," he offered up, trying to sound excited and not terrified. "I've been scouting an island around here, thinking it might've been one, but I never—" A huge boom shook the sky above them, and the ground on which they sat, as though Odin himself had taken the world in his hands and jostled it around. Instinctively they reach out to each other, and she heard Hiccup exhale sharply as he wrapped himself around her. She had heard stories of volcanoes, and how they could level towns, wipe out peoples. She thought of the people back home, of her mother, and how frightened everyone must have been. Stormfly curled closer to her.

"Are the gods angry?" she whispered—"the island was covered in soft ash, like snow.

Hiccup smiled weakly, as they pulled apart, but not by much. "Something like that."

"When you say 'an island around here,' not this island, right?"

"No. It's miles away." He stared out beyond the island, to where a horizon must have existed, but they could see only ash and flecks of fire. "We'll be safe, we just have to wait until the eruption stops and the ash clears."

"And how long is that gonna take?" As if to answer her, another quake rattled the island. His hand gave hers a squeeze.

"A day? Maybe two?"

Astrid buried her head in his shoulder and groaned. "My mom is going to kill me."

"Hey, at least a volcanic ash cloud is a pretty good excuse," he replied, with forced levity. "And we're close enough to Berk they've got to be seeing the effects of it a little. No skepticism this time around!" They both put a good but failed effort into laughing.

"How do you know so much about volcanoes?" she asked, and he shrugged. "No, that's a real question. How do you know?"

Hiccup moved away from her, his brow furrowed at the toe of his boot. "It's nothing." It seemed like a simple enough thing to ask, factual and whatnot, and she couldn't help pouting at a little as his weird standoffishness.



"What's the big secret?"

"Not a secret," he answered, a little sheepish,. "Okay. Well, when we were younger, you and the twins and Snotloutâ€| less so Fishlegs, but pretty much, you guysâ€|"

"All hated you?"

"Thank you for summing that up," he said dryly.

Astrid smiled, thinking how the tables had turned, and Hiccup shot her a glare. "Sorry," she spluttered, covering her mouth. "Keep going."

"So," he continued, relaxing as she sidled nearer to him, "I was alone a lot of the time. I drew things. And I read books. I read all the annals of Berk."

"The annals of Berk?"

"The yearly recordâ€"it's the weather patterns, harvest yield, births and marriages and new chiefs. That kind of thing. The Elder keeps it, so I borrowed them from Gothi." She nodded. She had never once thought that anyone might be writing this sort of information down, but as established, Hiccup had a very different perspective. "And in there, there was some stuff about volcanoes. There have been eruptions in the archipelago before." And then, as if hearing he'd begun to sound too much like the annals himself, he added, "I also chased trolls. I was a weird kid." The dour expression on his face read, Still am.

"I chased trolls too," she said dismissively. "They're real."

"You did?"

"What?"

"Astrid!"

"What?" He was grinning at her, and she started punching at his arm to get him to stop, which he didn't.

"You chased trolls? In the forest behind the village? When we were kids!"

"Yes," she half-grunted. His laughter was sort of infectious; she fought to live the humor down.

"How come I never saw you?"

"Because trolls aren't blind! I was hiding."

"So you saw me?"

"Yes. All the time." She remembered he would come barreling down the path from the village, an annoying surprise that had once nearly knocked her out of her tree perch. Peering at his hand in hers, she realized that was when she had first pegged him as a loserâ€"not in the sense that he was uncool (that was also true, but Astrid didn't put much stock in the abstract idea of "coolness"), but in the sense



that he would never win. And all Astrid had cared about was winning. Again, how the tables had turned, right on to her head.

"And what did you think?" A grin still split his face, sending her stomach into spasms.

"I thought, 'oh, there's that weird boy who doesn't know trolls aren't blind,'" she replied, and they laughed genuinely this time, their shoulders knocking. As she caught her breath, she found him looking at her with an almost exacting expression, as though struggling to make sense of something in her face.

"What?" she demanded, flushing under his gaze. The most violent shaking seemed to have stopped, at least for the time being, and only the distance rumbled, the ground beneath them twitching every so often in tandem with that sound. She was practically used to it, by now. The falling ash was sort of lovely, even, and it felt warmer than it had been in weeks. One of them had to have some food and water in a saddlebag, or they could try to fish when it cleared a bit—she could spend two days here, no problem. She didn't think she'd be bored.

Hiccup said, in a tone that seemed to admonish its own stupidity, "I really like your nose, a lot."

Astrid laughed, very loudly, and tried to cover it with a cough. "Oh man," she said, putting her hands over her gut like she'd been punched there, "you are never going to hear the end of that one. That's awful. Yikes."

He put his face in his hands. "I wish I were never born."

"Oh, come on, this from the boy who defeated the Red Death?"

"This is worse, this is terrible." Behind him, Toothless made a noise that sounded a lot like laughter.

"Gods, Hiccup," she moaned, pulling his hands away and toward her, so she could lean in. "Everyone's got to start somewhere."

She kissed him again, gentler this time, to a less resoundingly positive response. When she sat back, he looked torn.

Astrid frowned. "Or not?"

>"It's not that," he said, but she didn't feel convinced. Hiccup groaned-sighed, a sort of characteristic noise from him, where it sounded like someone had sat on his abdomen in the middle of an exhale. "Astrid, we need to talk."<p>

"Oh no," she muttered, exchanging a panicked look with Stormfly (who was always on her side in these situations).

"Oh yes," he cut in, "because, \_because\_ whenever I try to talk to you about this we get interrupted, or you pull that pouty face, and I'm just—| we need to talk about it."

"You said you'd bear with me, Hiccup!"

"That was months ago, I've been bearing, I \_am\_ bearing—"I just want to \_talk\_."



"Talk about what?" she tried, but he was ready with an answer, sitting forward to address her.

"About how you were so angry thinking I'd forgotten about you that you reacted by lying to me when you were in danger, because you get so upset when someone mistakes us for being together, but then you don't want anyone else to come on flights with us because that's 'our thing', and you'dâ€"you'd rather kiss me than say you care about me, which, let's face it Astrid, is a little bit weird?" He'd let go of her hands and dropped them in her lap, where she stared at her fingers in silence. "It's justâ€"it's just confusing. Every time I say it's confusing you just, tell me I'm confusing too, and maybe that's true! I'll answer any question you have, Astrid, I just need you to tell me what's going on. Please, Astrid." Her face was wet all of a sudden.

"I don't know." When she looked up at him she could see very little anger there, which was comforting, by degrees. He took her hands back in his, mouthing something, maybe \_whoa, whoa\_â€"he had never seen Astrid cry, even like this, silently with her chin held high. Understandable: the last time she'd done so, it involved fleeing to the woods in the middle of the night. "I'm scared, maybe."

"Scared of what?"

She shrugged violently. "Because I used to know what the future was going to be like, and the older I get the less clear it becomes."

He slumped over, hands still tight around hers. "I know that feeling."

"Yes, but you \_are\_ \_our\_ future, Hiccup." He drew back, startled by her confidence in this assertion. "Me, I'mâ€"yesterday's girl, or something."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Is it ridiculous, Hiccup?" she said, scowling.

He flushed and ducked his head. "Well, I accept that you're feeling that way and everything, but it's ridiculous to me, because from where I'm sitting you're very much today's girl. Woman. Person."

"Girl-woman-person is correct," she said through a sniffle, and he grinned.

"I can't imagine a future for Berk without you, either." She tried to mop her face on her wristguard, and his hand came to rest on her shoulder. "Though admittedly I'm biased, since if it's not obvious, I am kind of crazy about you?" Astrid chortled, and then inhaled deeply, recovering.

"I didn't \_need\_ to hear you say that," she began, her confidence restored if shaky.

He conceded hastily, "Of course you didn't."

"\_But\_ it did help. So thank you."



"Anytime you need someone to sing your praises, you call my name, milady." Hiccup gave her a little salute, and something tightened in her chest.

"I'm sorry I ever hated you."

"I'm sorry I ever treated you like Snotlout does," he sighed, with a pitiful glance out at the ashy island.

"It's okay. That was never really you." He smiled at her and she added, with some awkwardness, "I can say that because I am also crazy aboutâ€¦ you."

Awkwardness aside, Hiccup flashed her an enormous smile, his face lit up. "That, Astrid," he pecked her on the cheek, "is extremely good news."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, yes!"

"Well, I don't know what to do about it right now." Now that her emotional moment and the immediate natural disaster had passed, she felt for the first time how much they had really been touching, these past few minutes. She glanced at his hand on her shoulder and, as if on cue, he drew it away. "You know how it is, once we'reâ€¦ that, we can never un-become that, and I'm only sixteen."

He repeated what she'd said earlier, dying hope in his tone, "You'll be seventeen in a few weeks."

"You know it's different for me than it is for you, Hiccup."

He propped his chin up on a knee, mouth twisted into a wanting smile. "I had heard something about that, yeah."

"I'm not ready to be your girlfriend," she said. In that moment she felt braver than she had ever felt in the battle arena, and humbled too; and she looked Hiccup right in the eye, even though the disappointment on his face stabbed her in the gut. But he deserved forthrightness, and a whole lot moreâ€¦ the latter of which one day, she'd give him. Just not today.

"Okay," he muttered. "That'sâ€¦ open-ended." This was just the sort of emotional clarity Hiccup appreciated and valued, which she knew because it had always differentiated him from every other Viking she knew. And he was obviously struggling with the disparity between that value and appreciation, and his intense admiration of Astrid, a very flattering thing that somehow only succeeding in assuring her she'd made the right decision.

"Can you handle it?"

He drew himself up a few inches. "Yeah, I think I can. It's not like you can get rid of me, us being co-chiefs and all."

Feeling like air, she mirrored the kiss he'd left on her cheek not a minute ago. "I did say I wasn't ready, not that I wasn't interested. Personally, I feel like this whole volcano thing is really just



Odin's excuse for us to make out for two days." Hiccup started to laugh and she jabbed him in the stomach. "What, is that a \_no\_?"

"I can't say no. I don't know how. What's no? Is that a word?"

Late afternoon the next day, Hiccup announced that he thought it was clear enough to fly home. Through an off-white haze, the horizon line was finally visible, but Astrid only groaned, and tried to drag him back to the spot which had been just theirs for twenty-four ecstatic, lazy hours of talking and kissing. So they took another three, just to be safe.

It was starting to get dark by the time they started home, and sunset when they arrived, the short journey lengthened by the still-testy weather. Berk, like the island they left, was covered in ash. They would have to pray for a heavy rain, to wash it away. Crops had already been lost. She caught herself thinking these things and glanced at Hiccup, in front of her on Toothless; how had he already got her considering rain patterns and crops after a day together? That was so \_chiefly\_.

They touched down in the square and someone shouted, "STOICK! THEY'RE BACK!"

The chief emerged from his and Hiccup's house, his great feet thundering across the green to meet them.

"Son!"

"Hi, Dad, we're fine." Astrid waved.

"You two are making a habit of this." Stoick put an oversized hand on Hiccup's shoulder, looking deeply concerned. "The gods have sent us a punishment, son."

"It's just a volcano, Dad," Hiccup explained, apparently deaf to the understatement of it being '\_just\_ a volcano', and he went on to tell them everything that had occurred in scientific detail, which seemed to befuddle and mystify the Hooligans as much as it clarified the events. If anything, they looked \_more\_ convinced that the gods had sent them a punishment. When he came to the aspect of the story involving his and Astrid's being stuck on an island by themselves for a night and a day, the general response was something along the lines of, \_well\_, of course \_these two\_ kids found an excuse to cozy up together\_, and by the end of the unofficial town meeting, Astrid was propped up against Stormfly, rubbing her temples.

Hiccup did the talking because he was better at the talking, and once he'd said his piece, he and Stoick started plotting a cleanup effort for the village, which was her cue to sneak out.

Except that when she turned around, she found the twins, Snotlout, and Fishlegs waiting for her.

Snotlout stepped forward, a hand draped nobly across his chest. "Astrid, I am so sorry you had to go through that without a strong masculine figure to make you feel safe."

Ignoring this stupidity, Ruff grinned at her. "Pretty convenient volcanic ash cloud, huh. Did you have fun?"



"So much fun," Astrid chimed coyly, and then leaned toward her friends, making a special effort to get close to Snotlout. "You know, Hiccup won't brag, but let me tell you, he could. Plenty of material."

She gave their astonished looks a big smile and turned to stalk off. Behind her, Fishlegs whispered, "I don't know what that means." They'd struggle for ages.

But the victorious moment didn't last. She'd made it ten feet out of the square when she heard her mother's voice, and the towering woman appeared out of nowhere. "Astrid. Let's walk home together." Well. There went her escape. She gave Phlegma a pained smile but went along with it.

At first they were quiet, boots crunching in the ash, but Astrid could feel a wallop around the corner.

"So," said Phlegma. "You got your wish."

There it was.

"Well," said Astrid, looking straight ahead.

"Well? Did you enjoy it?"

Astrid turned bright red. Why did everyone want to know about all the fun she'd had with Hiccup? "It wasn'tâ€"like that, Mom, I told youâ€"

Her mother raised a hand and shook her head, not needing an explanation, so Astrid fell silent. "One day I'll ask that question and you'll say yes, you did enjoy it. Which you should." Silent but no less red, apparently. This conversation grew more horrifying each time they tried to have it.

"We didn't," she swore miserably.

"I believe you. That was not my meaning." They had climbed a hill and arrived at the Hofferson house; her mother stopped and turned to her. "When you disappeared yesterday, Astrid, we did not know if you would ever be back. I have been thinking about your frustration lately."

"Yeah?" She glanced down into the square, where Hiccup was trying to stop Toothless from rolling in the giant drifts of ash.

"Yes. You are feeling condescended and limited by your lot."

Her head snapped to look at her mother. "Yes. That's right." She couldn't hide the surprise in her voiceâ€"it was a better summary than she could've given herself.

Phlegma cleared her throat, and adjusted her helmet under her arm, where she always seemed to carry it in case she would have to flit off to battle in the midst of a heartfelt talk with her daughter. Though, this conversation seemed to Astrid the weak imitation of heartfeltâ€"but it was honest, for once. "I propose," said her mother, "that you accompany me on my next voyage out from



Berk."

Astrid's mouth fell open. "Like a raiding party?"

"Not raidingâ€"expanding the village's resources, coming into contact with new lands and peoples. Exploring, much like you do on your dragon, only we will go further than you could imagine. We are going South."

South. Astrid had heard about the Southâ€"that there were cities of gold, warmongering chieftains, unimaginable creatures. There would be new foods to try, new weapons to master. Even just the edge of imagining it made her head spin.

"Are you serious? I could come?"

Phlegma seemed lifted by Astrid's enthusiasm. "I'll mention it to Stoick, but you are my daughter."

"And Stormfly, too?"

Her dragon had been trailing them to the house and had happily slipped back into her stall, but she perked up and crept forward at the sound of her name, nudging Astrid in the back.

"I don't see why not. A dragon could come in handy." Astrid grinned up at her mother (who was and would always been about a head taller than her), who then hesitated. "We'll be gone several months, dear."

Astrid hesitated at that, too. She could still hear Hiccup talking to Toothless somewhere below them. "How many months?"

"Four, at the least. Maybe more, depending on the weather. It could be half way through summer before we return." Phlegma's eyes followed Astrid's, down to the boy in the village square. "Then again," she said gently. "Perhaps some time away from Berk would do you good." Astrid brushed her bangs out of her eyes.

"When are you leaving?"

"Another couple of days. Once the ash is taken care of." She patted her daughter's shoulder, a little awkward. "You can think about it until then." Phlegma went past her into the house, and Astrid collapsed on the porch, frowning as Stormfly nipped at her feet.

"I know, girl," she muttered. "It's gonna be a tough one."

A few hours later, with Berk under darkness, Astrid climbed out of her bedroom window to avoid her mother's gaze, something she'd done dozens of times as a child but not so much in later years. Seeing her master awake, a dozing Stormfly perked up in her stall, but Astrid waved her off. "Go back to bed. Just me, tonight." The dragon purred, and curled back up. She'd had a few days just as eventful as Astrid's and was equally tired. But unlike Astrid, Stormfly did not have a massive, potentially life-changing decision to make. So she could get to sleep.

The air was still a little ashy in patches, but she could see the moon well on the otherwise clear night, and it lit her path as she



trod quietly through the village.

A part of Astrid had already decided. Really, the difficulty lay in explaining it to Hiccup, and her instinct told her that she couldn't wait an unnecessary second to do so. Which was how she ended up standing under his window after every Hooligan in Berk had called it a night.

The real test here was going to be how well she'd gotten to know Toothless when Hiccup wasn't looking. They'd started out a little rough, sure, but since then she'd made an effort with him (he was the second best dragon on Berk, after all), and hopefully it had paid off, because she was about to test some boundaries.

She stared at the open window for a moment, then hooked her fingers in her mouth and gave a soft whistle.

At first, nothing. Then a rustle. A pair of stunning green (non-human) eyes appeared, peering down at her curiously.

"Toothless," she said in a stage whisper, "I need you to get Hiccup." His ears flapped thoughtfully. "Please, it's important," she added, a little pathetic.

Toothless made a gurgling sound and disappeared. She heard some more rustling, and then a groggy voice: "Okay, you know you don't fit in the bed, budâ€"what?" Hiccup arrived at the window, and she relaxed. "Astrid?"

"Can I come up, or can you come down?"

"Is everything okay?"

"Sort of. I think so." She swallowed hard. "At the risk of sounding repetitive, we need to talk."

Toothless helped Hiccup down and then promptly fell asleep by the house. So it was Hiccup and Astrid alone who crossed the bridge and sat by the unlit fire pit, looking down at what few lights remained on in the village: one at the armory, another at the Great Hall. Everywhere else was silver under the moon.

"Four months," repeated Hiccup. "That's a really long time."

"Maybe more. Judging by how long my mom usually says her trips are going to take and how long they actually end up taking, it'll be more like six." Astrid bit her lip, watching him out of the corner of her eye as best she could with the darkness. "It is, though. It's a really long time."

"What do you want me to say?" He sounded tired. Suddenly she felt guilty for dragging him out of bed in the middle of the night to tell him she might up and leave for half a year. She had only just shut him down in a different wayâ€"had she really needed to make a big deal out of this? On the other hand, it would've been disingenuous to play it down, after everything they'd been through in the past few days.

"Maybe," she suggested quietly, "you could tell me how much you'll



hate me and never forgive me if I leave, so I have an incentive to stay."

"You don't already have an incentive to stay?"

"I was kidding."

He didn't laugh. "I'm not going to hate you, Astrid. It sounds like a really cool thing. Go if you want." She did want. She also needed, in the region of her gut yearning for a taste of the air beyond Berk.

"And you won't be upset?"

He hesitated, and then shook his head. "I'll be upset. I'll \_miss\_ you. But it'll fade. And it doesn't mean you shouldn't do it." Hiccup glanced up at her, and smiled. It seemed forced but the effort was enough to reassure her. He knew a little bit about doing unpopular things for a greater good. "I thought part of the reason you don't want to be my girlfriend is so you don't have to factor me in to your life decisions like this."

She didn't remember saying that, but it was true—he'd probably had some incredible insight into her problem or whatever magic he did with feelings. It made her want to punch him in the arm, but she restrained herself. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

"You're amazing," she blurted out, and Hiccup looked up in surprise. "I'll miss you too."

"Yeah, well," he said with a stiff smile, standing in preparation for their walk back. "Just promise me you'll remember to come back, eventually."

She rose from her seat, and linked her pinky with his. "Promise."

\* \* \*

><p>AN: The title of this chapter: technically true. Lots happening. I thought it was really funny.

And please review, or leave anything on the story other than a hit. Helps a lot!

## 5. That's Powerful Stuff

A/N: This chapter is a little over half the length of previous chapters. That's deliberate—I'm going to shorten the chapters so I can put them up quicker. I've been sitting on these three thousand words for half a week and I won't be able to write properly until the weekend, so I figured, hey, why not post what I have? I'm not used to it but I'll adapt. Additionally, this chapter is Hiccup POV, which I won't do often but I wanted to give it a go. Enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup kept touching his hair. It stuck out more than it did when



it was longer, which made him nervous. Then again, today? Everything made him nervous.<p>

"Big day today," Gobber chimed, turning from the anvil to greet his arriving apprentice. "Odin Almighty! What'd you do to your hair? You look like you've been struck by lightning."

He wincedâ€"he hadn't thought it was \_so\_ bad, maybe not the popular style but when had he ever subscribed to such a thing (for better or for worse)? "I cut it, Gobber. I cut my hair."

"With a hatchet?" Gobber joked. Little did he know.

"Yes," said Hiccup flatly. At the smith's impressively animated guffawing, Hiccup threw up his hands. "Okay, okay, but it seemed like a good idea at four in the morning when I couldn't sleep because I was so worked up about today, and you know, Toothless was encouraging at the timeâ€" " He slumped over to his workstation. "â€"which, I now realize was more likeâ€"| egging me on."

Gobber tossed him an apron, grinning. "Bit nervous, I take it?"

"I'm not nervous," said Hiccup, sounding as if he were about to climb out of his own skin and run off.

"You better hope short hair's in style down South." Gobber gave him a knowing wink, a frightening gesture in and of itself, but the implication was worse.

He tied on his apron and tried, "Don't know what you mean."

"Oh, don't waste your breath," crowed his old master, examining a mangled broadsword, "you've been staring longingly at the harbor since the day Astrid left, all hearts in your eyes and whatnot. All of Berk knows it! You're driving your father mad," he confided. "Says it distracts you."

Hiccup glanced at the ceiling; so okay, maybe his dad wasn't entirely off base on that one. He could probably sail to the South and back in the bleeps and instants and hair-widths of time he'd lost to thoughts of Astrid.

"Okay, fine." He started at the bellows, scowling. The task came easier nowadays, which made him feel both proud and certain that he would wake up any minute from this dream and be a shrimp again. Not even a big shrimp, like one of the babies he gave to Sharpshot for doing tricks. "It's justâ€"| She's going to have seen so much, Gobber, I just don't want her to get back here and think, 'oh, the sheep are bleating, the dragons are lighting things on fire, nothing's changed on the tiny damp isle where I grew up, might as well turn back around and keepâ€"| exploiting the riches of an unknown world!'"

Gobber assessed him, and gave a little nod. "Well, I'm sure a haircut will go a long way." Groaning, Hiccup laid his face against one of the timber pillars supporting the forge. "\_But\_ you're mad if you think nothing's changed."

Hiccup sat up. "What?"

"Aye. Great Hall's been almost entirely repainted, all you teens have



grown another foot, new bath house'll be ready in time for the freeze. I can't wait," he said mistily. "Oh, and you've got that racket of a sword! She'll like that one."

Hiccup glanced down at his leg, where the sword, Inferno, was snug against him. He was still working out some of the kinksâ€"a way to store extra cartridges, a smoother retraction mechanism, and stronger bolts on the telescopic element, to make it more of a weapon and less of a hyped-up torchâ€"but he'd done a small demonstration for the village about a month ago, to tremendous awe. "Yeah," he muttered. "She \_will\_ like that one."

"Honestly, Hiccup, if she found a way to like \_you\_ here on Berk the first time around, no adventure or gold beyond her wildest dreams or handsome famous war chieftain with a great white steed who wants to marry her and make her Queen of the Southâ€" This specificity did a little too much for Hiccup's imagination. "â€"is going to top that! Whatever makes a girl like that go for a guy like you, \_that\_'s powerful stuff." Gobber slapped him on the shoulder, thinking he'd been quite supportive with this speech.

"Thank you, very reassuring, that," Hiccup said through his teeth. His teacher made an effort, at least, even if he \_was\_ stuck on the notion of Hiccup as a fourteen-year-old, when he'd been full of potential but all his successes looked like accidents. You couldn't blame Gobber: even Hiccup himself was a little stuck on that notion. He went searching for a piece of metal to bang up on.

"No problem," Gobber chirped. He proceeded to whistle through the day.

The first letter had come in May, on the wings of a Terrible Terror: \_Trip extended. Can't say no to gold. See you in August. \_

The second letter arrived the first of that month: \_Met some pirates! Sticky situation. More like September.\_

And the third one appeared in the middle of September: \_War on the continent. Going the long way. Expect us October in time for Winter Nights.\_

Then two days ago, a final letter. \_October 11\_\_th\_\_, mid-afternoon with good weather\_.

Not four months, not even six. Nine months, they'd been gone, and today, she'd be back.

Hiccup had read every one of these correspondences aloud at the council meetings, since the Terrors delivered to him, and he faced many knowing smiles when he'd looked up from the fourth letter. Maybe he'd been a little obvious without realizing. The attitude he'd taken on was half gratitude at everyone's sincere desire for his (their) happiness, and half silent pleading that no one screw this up for him. It was rare to get a second chance at a first impression. The probability he'd embarrass himself was high enough, he didn't need the added risk that came with a peanut gallery.

By his father's decree, the opening celebration of Winter Nightsâ€"which would go on for a week, with festivities through the days and eveningsâ€"had been expanded to include a thanksgiving for



the return of Phlegma's fleet, as well as the traditional welcome of winter. So it was the biggest festival in years, and preparation had been underway for over a month, including a massive banquet every night, a tournament, mask-wearing, games and races, poetry readings, and a fair amount of animal sacrifice (Vikings, you know). Privately, Stoick had confided in his son that the treasures of this expedition would be the greatest in Berk's history, if Phlegma fulfilled her promise, and Hiccup did hope the Hoffersons would continue their good record with promises.

He hammered himself into a sweat at the forge that morning, working his nerves into a shield, an axehead, and a small, intricately detailed knife he'd been laboring over for several weeks, rehearsing some filigree openwork. It would make a good gift for someone, though it was maybe not as good as the knives of Southern craftsmen. But he couldn't think too deeply about that.

At noon, Gobber took one whiff of him and laughed, saying, "You give me a run for my money, good work," at which point Hiccup knew he needed to bathe.

The sun shone high and bright over Berk as he went out into the village, the weather blessedly warm for fall, Terrors flitting from the feeding station in the square to the roofs of houses. In the arena, Snotlout instructed their new crop of students on transporting up food from the storehouses with their dragons, with Fishlegs supervising. Stoick was at the harbor, clearing space for new goods. Owing to an incident involving some rotten fish and a catapult, the twins were punished with decorating the Great Hall for the night's festivities, and their argument about who got to wear the largest of the masks could be heard halfway across the isle. After their morning flight, Toothless had abandoned his master to lie on the warm stones in the plaza, and Hiccup caught the fluttery sounds of the dragon's snoozing as he approached his best friend.

It was all very ordinary, when he sort of felt like they ought to be running around like Zipplebacks with their heads tied together.

Toothless perked up when he saw Hiccup, and then twitched once he caught the smell. "Yeah, okay, bud," Hiccup muttered, flipping his prosthetic into the flying attachment. "I get it, I stink. We're going to the bathhouse." Berk's bathhouse was the first full structure Hiccup had been allowed to conceive and design entirely on his own, after many years of frustration and embarrassment at the lack of privacy around what was basically a tiny hot spring at the bottom of the village. Secretly, he'd been taking baths in the unfinished building all summer, under the pretense of checking up on things; he liked the sense of authorship he had over the building, it was a tangible reminder he could do things. It would be deserted today with everyone getting ready for the holiday, and the spring the village had been using during the construction was a twenty-minute walk. The bathhouse was five.

But Toothless took one glance at him and stretched back out under the midday sun.

"Are you serious? You can come right back here after, it's a thirty-second trip."



One eye closed, the dragon gave him a look that clearly said, \_then make it yourself.\_

"Fun day. Great day," Hiccup grumbled, readjusting his leg. This downward trend would need to reverse itself by mid-afternoon. Only a few more hours, and what had been a productive, sobering, lonely nine months would be over.

He grabbed a set of clean clothes from the house and started the almost entirely vertical journey, zigzagging down the side of the stacked cliff, where he passed a few houses, their residents peeking outside to wave at him. Everyone knew his name. Of course they did—he'd be their chief someday. He waved back, tried to look comfortable with celebrity. On another day he might have stopped and spoken to each of them—his father did that whenever he walked through the village—but today was not an ordinary day. Today was a Zippleback-heads-tied-together kind of day. And he wasn't chief yet, hard as that was to believe sometimes. He'd slip into it unthinkingly, and then have a sort of out-of-body experience: \_Who's this kid calmly giving orders, what's his deal? When did he get tall? That's not me\_. Hiccup would remember that Hiccup didn't even want to be chief, not for a very long time. Leadership, ha. Power? Overrated.

The bathhouse was nearly complete, missing only its roof. It sat just down from the hot spring, and had a large stone tub that caught the stream, and a drain flowing into the sea. Not a very complicated design, but the first of its kind on Berk, and as he dunked his head under the water he thought how simple wasn't always bad.

He could see the sky through the open roof, that impossibly blue shade it sometimes got to be, and once he'd scrubbed himself and rinsed his hair (it was indeed very short), he sat there staring up at it contemplatively. It was the calmest he'd been in days. Maybe the nerves had been silly in the first place: Astrid was coming home. The only thing he should really have been was happy.

But he was still nervous—just having a good moment.

He puffed out his cheeks and exhaled, touching his hair yet again. Nearly dry, important since he didn't anyone to surmise he'd been using the bathhouse before everyone else. He clamored out of the tub and started to mop himself off, until something familiar streaked across the peripheral sky and he slipped, almost tumbling back into the water as he called out.

"\_Stormfly\_!"

The blueish bullet did not return, however. Panicking—if he missed their arrival, he'd \_miss their arrival\_—he dried himself as quickly as he could, squirming into his trousers and shirt and starting to strap on his leg. It took too long, he knew it took too long and that it hadn't always been like that. He thought sometimes it might be better to be born like this, rather than spending a quarter of your life with two legs and then, suddenly, one. For such a tremendous loss it only foiled him in small ways, but that was \_more\_ frustrating, he couldn't make excuses for himself and he couldn't get to the docks all the way on the other side of the village in time to see Astrid step off that ship like he had actually dreamed about \_multiple times\_, because his hands kept shaking on the



buckles of his prosthetic.

He made it to the door after what felt like an eternity, but dropped all his clothes on the way out, and groaned pathetically to see them lying there, spelling out his hopelessness. Everything was going so, so well!

"Hiccup?"

He stopped. He was holding his dirty underwear.

"Astrid?"

She stood there, indeed, about ten feet from where he was on the path to the bathhouse, the sun giving her hair an orange glow.

"Hi," she said slowly, biting back a laugh. Sheâ€| looked different. She was still beautiful, of course, and that hit him hard now, when it had been so long since he'd set eyes on her person, rather than one of his bad (bad, unworthy) sketches. She wore a shirt of a ruddy red color, and her hair was braided some new way. And her \_shape\_... hips, he realized. He didn't remember hips. Also, something was different north of the hipsâ€"she just, looked \_different\_. Like a woman. Like the kind of person a famous war chieftain with a great white steed would \_beg\_ to make Queen of the South.

Ultimately all he could think to say was, "You're early."

Her nose wrinkled (and a great nose it still was), but she kept smiling. "Sorry?"

"No. No. It's notâ€"long time no see," he said, absurdly offhand.

"This isn't going how you wanted, is it?" she laughed.

He shut his eyes. Just Astrid. His friend. "Nope. Not even close."

His friend who could make him woozy with a nudge on the arm, as she did now. "Well, I just came to see the bathhouse. I got here before the ships and Gobber wouldn't stop talking about it. It looks wonderful." She gazed past him, at the building, and then met his eyes again. "Walk up to the square with me?"

He nodded, feeling like his tongue had gotten stuck in his throat.

They went a few meters in silence, and then she said, "So, your hair."

He'd forgotten, but the horrific moment this morning when he'd stood in his room with a hatchet in one hand and two inches of his hair in the other came back to him at once. "Oh," he said, trying to cover it up, "That's just, you knowâ€" "

"I can fix it," she said simply. She looked like she was about to reach out and touch the literal hackjob, but then she spotted a woman watching them from the steps of a house and quickly retracted her hand. "It'll look good. You just need to neaten it up a bit, I've got



some shears that'll do."

His mouth popped open, to the point where he couldn't even return the timid little smile she gave him. Timid, why? It hadn't even occurred to him that Astrid could be nervous about coming home too, and he felt foolish. After everything she'd said during the ash cloud about futures and Berk, he should have known she was worried she'd been forgotten. He could fix that, he thought, but not now. Not here, with people peeking out their windows to get a glimpse of the future chief and his maybe-wife. Well, he knew that's what they saw, regardless of what was true, and Astrid would know that. Astrid knew pretty much everything. He wanted to be alone with her.

He coughed, glancing up the incline to the village. "You know, we should"

But Hiccup almost fell flat on his face when Stormfly, out of nowhere, shoved her way between the two of them and planted herself in the middle of the path, a tree branch about the length of Astrid's entirety dangling from her mouth.

Astrid gasped, giving the dragon a healthy pat. "Good girl, Stormfly. Good job!" She turned to Hiccup and grinned. "I've been teaching her to fetch. I threw this down from the rope bridge twenty minutes ago."

Hiccup's mouth hung open a little (again) and he felt a weird sensation, like a swelling in his chest. Pride, he realized. "That's amazing. I've never seen a dragon do that on command before."

She shrugged, but she was smiling a victorious kind of smile. A smile well deserved. "We were scaling mountains at one point and when equipment would drop, it'd be gone forever," she explained. "One day she seemed to like rescuing my axe, so I thought, 'this could come in handy,' and here we are. It's our game." Stormfly dropped the branch into Astrid's arms and rubbed against her, and Astrid tossed the toy. Weirdly, the tips of Hiccup's ears felt hot.

"I can't wait to hear about everything you did," he said numbly.

"Anytime." She patted her saddle. "Want a ride to the square? Just like old times."

He almost said, "Actually, I've got a better idea, let's fly out to our ash cloud island and not stop touching each other for a long time, until it's dark and we've got an excuse to stay there all night, and while we're at it, for Odin's sake and the love of all that is good and righteous in this world, please never leave me again."

But he didn't say that. Instead, he smiled at her, wide enough to get the message across. "Sure."

## 6. Distractions

A/N: Thank you all for the positive feedback, it's been a huge encouragement as I'm writing this. Now that I've shortened the chapters I have no clue how long this thing is going to be, but I



definitely feel that it's going \_somewhere\_, so I guess it'll just get there in its own sweet time.

\* \* \*

><p>"How far South would you say they go?"<p>

"Who goes?"

"I mean, how far South can you find dragons," said Fishlegs, waving one of his cards at her. He had the worn repositories of information scattered across the drafting table, and was shuffling them around in earnest.

Astrid snipped off a bit of Hiccup's damp hair, evening its length. He hadn't spoken since she'd dipped his head back into a basin and set about carefully wetting the hair with her fingers—the clumped locks were easier to trim, in her experience (and she had been cutting her own hair since she was nine). The three of them sat in the forge, lit as it now was by candlelight at the late hour.

"Oh, I don't know," she mused, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. "Four weeks, maybe. But not more than six. Once you've gone six weeks South there's pretty much no more dragons."

"That's still pretty far, did you see any new species? Anything above a class seven?"

"I don't know what that means, Fishlegs," said Astrid, smiling to herself. She fixed another snip of hair; she had nearly got it all, but was taking her time: Hiccup enjoyed the preening, judging from his occasional contented sighs and stirs, as he sat slouched on a stool with his back to her.

But Fishlegs was blind to any ongoing intimacy. "Well," he offered, always prepared to educate, "anything with a wingspan thirty feet or bigger, that's generallyâ€"

"Fishlegs," said Hiccup suddenly, "maybe give it a rest with the dragon talk, Astrid hasn't even been back a whole day, she's probably tired."

She poked Hiccup's neck. "I don't mind."

"She doesn't mind," echoed Fishlegs, but Hiccup shot him a look and he shrunk away. "Okay, maybe we can talk tomorrow, Astrid? Do you have any notes I could see?"

She tried not to laugh but a grin was inescapable. "Not so many notes, no. I'll tell you what I can remember."

"Great!" He exchanged another glance with Hiccup, though this silent conversation was more complicated and, with Hiccup's facing away, Astrid couldn't quite intimate what he was trying to tell Fishlegs. "Hey," began their friend, getting up, "I think I'llâ€"

"HICCUP," boomed Stoick's voice from outside the forge, making all three of them jump. The chief entered in a stomping flurry, his face red. "Astrid," he grunted in greeting, "Fishlegs, outside now, I need to speak to my son."



Hiccup stood and glanced worriedly between his father and Astrid, who shook her head at him. "You're done," she muttered, meaning his hair but incidentally implying something very different.

As Stoick bristled at Hiccup's the beginnings of a serious dispute, she sensed Astrid and Fishlegs scampered from the forge. She tucked her good shears into the loop of her belt as the two of them paused in the square, watching from whence they'd come.

"He's terrifying," whispered Fishlegs, wide-eyed. Astrid looked back to the workroom, where Stoick's impressive figure cast a massive shadow against the walls and into the square. His unintelligible shouting well, it might've been reprimanding, but practically everything said in the chief's thunderous voice sounded like a shout could be heard from within, following by what might've been the occasional protestation of Hiccup's higher voice. Astrid's jaw clenched. She felt a jolt of anger at Stoick. Whatever Hiccup had done couldn't be so bad, this was the sort of reckless parenting that had given them both so much trouble in the past. Had nothing changed at all?

So, ignoring the hysterical mutterings of Fishlegs, Astrid started back toward the forge.

At first she thought she might go in, but as she drew nearer, she could make out their argument, and an impulse made her duck beneath a window, listening.

"make a habit of this, son, it'll only come to ruin you and this village," Stoick was saying, furious.

"It was one time, I forgot, I'm sorry"

"You can't forget the one thing I ask you to do for the preparations, son, it's a small task!"

"I'll do it now," Hiccup promised, and she could hear the hopeful way his eyebrows flew up.

"Gobber's taken care of it." Stoick had calmed down, but his sounding disappointed instead of angry didn't improve the situation. "When I was a young man, I never allowed whoever I fancied" Astrid's heart rose in her throat. "to distract me from the good of the village, I always put my people first."

She didn't understand why this made her nauseous; she knew Hiccup fancied her, they had kissed many times, and yet to hear it said aloud by his dad, with such dismissal and distain

"If there's ever a day when I'm allowed some distraction," Hiccup argued, "it ought to be this one, right? It's her first day back"

"A chief doesn't get allowances, Hiccup."

"It's just a sword, Dad"

"It's never just a sword!" roared Stoick. "It's been the duty of the chief's first son to bring up that sword from the armory on the



eve of Winter Nights for two hundred years, I did it, your grandfather did it, my grandfather did it, \_you've\_ done it for three years, you know how importantâ€”"

Astrid had been crouching for a couple of minutes now and her knees finally gave out, sending her crunching on to the leaves beneath the window. She missed the last of Stoick's rant, and heard only silence from the building's interior.

Then the chief said, in a stony tone, "Being seventeen is no excuse." More silence, and thumping, as Hiccup's father passed through the exit beside her and headed toward the Great Hall, where the party's blaring had begun.

Astrid clamored out from the bushes in time to meet Hiccup as he left the forge, resembling a kicked puppy limping back to its bed.

"Sorry," she started, but he shook his head.

"Forget it happened, okay?" He shuffled past her, toward the sound of their night beginning. "\_I'm\_ certainly going to try."

Now, Vikings knew how to do a few things. They knew how to build ships; they knew how to take baths; and they knew how to throw the kinds of parties Thor himself would've found excessive.

There was a ten-foot long replica of a longboat at the center table filled with fish and mutton and chicken legs and fat, shiny vegetables, and even sweets Phlegma had procured on her expedition, which were a rare luxury in Berk. A troupe of musicians played the great folk songs of their time, and intermittently men and women would break out dancing arm-in-arm. A man who told jokes for a living and wore a weird hat stood behind Trader Johann and twiddled quips while the latter tried to sell his wares. And there was meadâ€”there was lots of mead, endless mead. It was warm, sticky commotion.

Astrid sat with her friends and nursed a flagon. Her time abroad had desensitized her to the illicit pleasure of alcoholâ€”she now saw it less as the flavor of rebellion and more as a willing depreciation of her guard, which she would never endorse. Of course, the twins and Snotlout hadn't had the same experience, and were enjoying their unrestrained dip into Berk's libations. (Not that overindulgence was uncommon for the Viking teens, more that it was mediated by the next day's dutiesâ€”which, during Winter Nights, did not exist.) Hiccup disappeared within the first twenty minutes of the celebration, muttering under his breath about Toothless's dinner, so Astrid had mainly Fishlegs to talk to, and she set about racking her brain for any useful travel anecdotes. He at least seemed amused by stories of Southerners encountering their first ever dragon in the form of Stormfly, and Astrid had plenty of those.

An hour ticked by and everyone grew drunker and Fishlegs did not bore of dragons. Astrid started looking over his shoulder, trying to spy something interesting. Her mother arrived, finally, to a chorus of some old hero's song; Astrid sang with the crowd. They had a sort of an understanding, nowadays. She could comprehend a little bit better why Phlegma had said the things she'd said.



At one point, Ruffnut turned to her, and asked with a wicked grin, "So tell me about the Southern men."

Astrid's palms started to sweat. Her eyes flitted down to her drink. "Uh."

This was enough to tell Ruff there was something Astrid didn't want to share, which to Ruff's drunken sensibility constituted information indispensable to everyone's survival. "Oooh," she crooned, "Does Hiccup know? That poor kid, first his leg, nowâ€"

Astrid snatched the girl's mead away from her (Ruffnut groaned) and poured it out on the floor. "Trust me when I say that these two things are not even remotely similar."

Snotlout, even slower than usual, gasped, "ASTRID, AND \_HICCUP\_?" Several heads turned at the nearby tables to stare at him in disgust.

"Oh no," muttered Fishlegs.

"I think your eyes are broken," Tuff remarked, gently whacking Snotlout's head, "and also maybe your face and your ears. And your brain." Snotlout sat back, seething, but Astrid's attention was drawn elsewhere.

To her great relief, Hiccup reentered the Great Hallâ€"with his father. And they were arguing again.

They paused by the entrance and exchanged a few more harsh wordsâ€"their disagreement read in Stoick's clenched fists and Hiccup's scowlâ€"and then Hiccup marched over to join his friends. She tried not to let herself get sidetracked by the obvious success of her emergency haircut, but he did cut quite an impressive figure now, well groomed and having filled out even more in the months she'd been away. Oblivious to her appraisal, he threw himself on to the bench behind her.

"Hi, everyone," he murmured. Ruffnut belched.

"Everything okay?" asked Astrid, eyeing him.

Hiccup gave her a look that wanted to say more but didn't know how, so he settled on a shrug. She would get it out of him later, she decided, and in the mean time he could be driven to distraction, but instead he sat there frowning into his mead as the twins tried to best each other in chugging. Astrid was caught between wanting to punch him in the stomach and cradle his head in her lap, though the latter of these urges snuck up on her. Anyway, she knew one thing for sure, which was that she didn't feel terribly warm and fuzzy about Stoick just then.

"I'm going to bury you alive one day," Ruffnut told Snotlout conversationally, making his face contort with anger.

"Stop \_saying that\_, it's so creepy, you're a creep."

"Only I'm allowed to call her a creep," declared Tuffnut. He swung sloppily at Snotlout across the table, missing by a foot, but the gesture was enough to goad the other teen, who (having grown



increasingly incensed through the past ten minutes) tried to launch himself at Tuff and flopped belly-down next to Astrid's mead.

"Cut it out," she demanded, still more intent on Hiccup than anyone else.

But Tuff and Snotlout were now clawing ineffectively at each other, while Ruff laughed in the background. "You two look so stupid right now," she gushed, the tip of her braid sitting in her empty flagon. In their drunken tussle, Tuffnut whacked a flagon with his elbow and it flew to the floor, clanging loudly. Now there were eyes on their weird little fight, and Astrid started to forget Hiccup's moping.

And then Snotlout full on decked Tuffnut, and in doing so from such an awkward position sent himself spinning on to the floor like a roll of raw meat.

"Control your people, Hiccup," came Stoick's voice from across the hall. He didn't yell, but his lungs let him be heard over the distance, above the sound of the musicians playing on and conversations rumbling indistinctly. It was not a full stop in the room so much as a moment where time slowed to a crawl—the noise and activity when on, but everyone looked away from their merriment for a half-second, gazing from Snotlout and Tuffnut to Hiccup. They were waiting for him to stand up, to follow his father's instruction. To be a chief.

For Astrid, all it took was a quick glance, and she knew: it wouldn't happen right now. He was staring at Stoick, agape, infuriated. Shocked to be so publicly humiliated, maybe. But it didn't matter why he couldn't do it. He needed help.

And she would help him—Astrid grabbed Tuffnut by the collar, kicking him when he chimed, "why so strong, aren't you a lady?" With her other hand she seized Snotlout from the floor and dragged him, too, over to where sat a couple extra barrels of mead.

Grasping a chunk of either boy's hair, she dunked their heads in the barrels, shouting, "YOU WANT TO FIGHT DRUNK? I'LL TEACH YOU TO FIGHT DRUNK," and other such loose, random threats, until they both sobbed and coughed and spit and said they were terribly sorry, which took all in all about five seconds. Ruffnut's laughter echoed throughout the room, above the din of Hooligans gone back to their party.

The only ones still watching after she'd dumped them both on the floor and gone back to her table were her mother—at whom she shrugged, as if to say, a woman's gotta do, and the smile Phlegma gave her agreed—and the chief, whose mouth puckered severely as he assessed her. It made Astrid's stomach curl nervously to think she had disobeyed his wishes, even indirectly, but for whatever reason it made sense that her loyalty to Hiccup ran deeper than her loyalty any authority, even the chief's.

Speaking of Hiccup, he hadn't moved, and she caught the expression on his face as she returned to her seat: fury. It made her jump—was he mad at her? Had she been wrong in thinking he was immobilized? He couldn't be that angry, he was the one who hadn't moved when he needed to, all she had done was diffuse the situation.



Then Hiccup's hand wrapped around her wrist and her face felt hot. He was glaring over at Stoick. "Come on," he said, and tugged her along, out of the hall and into the night.

She stomped after him across the square, lit by a stream of orange from the open door to the hall, and the few lamps still burning in the windows of houses. There were a few sleepy drunks and one very much awake couple scattered about the green. Hiccup kept walking, past the feeding station and toward the harbor, and she called ahead to him. "Listen, I'm sorry if you're feeling \_upstaged\_, or whatever, but someone had to do something, okay, and it clearly wasn't going to be youâ€"

Hiccup whirled around to face her, looking annoyed but more pressingly, confused. "What are you talking about?"

She took a step back. "You're not mad that I took care of Snotlout and Tuffnut?"

"No, no of course I'm not madâ€"I'm grateful, actually, thanks for that." He gazed out at the harbor distractedly. A few pieces of this puzzle fell together in Astrid's mind. Hiccup was fighting with his father because his father thought he'd allowed her to distract him from his responsibilities as a leader; Hiccup had chosen to leave the party with her moments after he'd failed to live up to one of those responsibilities.

"So why'd you bring me out here?" she asked, though she already suspected the answer. That knowingness must've been clear in her tone, because Hiccup blushed deeply enough she could see it through the darkness on the harbor path.

"I'm sorry, Astrid."

"Don't you use me to make your dad angry, Hiccup, that's notâ€"

"I know, it's not fair." He put a hand on her arm, and she immediately forgot her frustration. A little because sure, there was a confidence and regard in the gesture that made her mouth go dry, but also because she knew the apology was authentic. He was sincere. She put her fingers over his. He went on, "You didn't hear him talking earlier."

"Er, well," she coughed. "I may haveâ€| I heard \_some\_ of it when you were arguing in the forge."

His eyebrow quirked up. "You eavesdropped?"

"If it makes you feel any better, I was originally going to bust in and defend you, but I got distracted."

Hiccup grinned, and took her hand in his, drawing her away from the center of the path. They were not aloneâ€"she could hear someone singing in the square behind themâ€"but the handholding felt private, and intimate, as long as no one was actively watching them. "Thanks," he said, just as his smile faltered. "Later he found me skipping the party and got angry again. He said I was fickle, and I asked him to remember what it was like when he was with my mother." He mentioned this as though it were a fact of the matter, an obvious parallel, but



Astrid's eyes fell to her feet. Hiccup continued staring out at the moonlit sea, not noticing her embarrassment. "That didn't go over well. Now he's taking it out on me. Which is weird, I mean, you'd think he could find some empathy or something. Maybe he didn't love my mother at all."

These words landed between them and it was silent. She became very aware of their hands hanging by her hips.

"Astrid," Hiccup started, sounding like he'd realized his mistake. "I didn't meanâ€"

"It's okay," she interjected. A year ago she might have physically turned and run away, but she had learned recently that running away tended to aggravate whatever issue one left in the dust. Chin high, she turned to Hiccup, grabbing him by the shoulders. "I was really hoping we could put this conversation off for a few more days. It's only my first night back and I'm tired, and we have a lot to talk about."

Hiccup forced a smile and nodded. It had grown supremely awkward in a matter of seconds.

"And you know," she added, trying for supportive, "it's not like I don't want to talk about your mom, whenever you'd like to orâ€"or I guess when you need to, and I don't mean want to talk about her, really, more likeâ€|" What a bust. She let go of him and made to move back toward the Great Hall.

"It's fine, I understand," Hiccup managed. She couldn't gauge which one of them sounded more pathetically embarrassed. This was bad, they were backsliding. She looked at him, squaring her shoulders. Equals, partners.

"I just wanted you to know that I don't run out for the tough stuff."

She expected him to smile and pat her or something, but he lookedâ€"taken aback?

"Astrid, I've never once doubted that."

"Oh."

She felt a peculiar expression cross her face, and judging from the little laugh Hiccup gave as he watched her reaction, he'd noticed it too. He gave a heaving sighâ€"heaving off the heft of the conversation, of the arguments with his father, of the discussion of his mother, who was gone. "Do you want to go back in? We could, I don't know, dance?"

Her response to this suggestion was so automated it cut right through any awkwardness she felt. "Absolutely not, I don't dance."

"That's good, because I was totally bluffing. I'm terrible."

"No, really? You, a bad dancer?" she joked, and as they walked back to the party, with laughter easing the density between them, he gave her hand a squeeze.



## 7. You And Me and All of Berk

A/N: I wrote this chapter in seven hours, which feels like a real achievement. Also, just a warning that there is a lot of innuendo in this one. The whole first scene of the chapter is just one giant innuendo.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid's axe sprouted from the neck of a wooden mannequin, and glinted in the low morning sun.<p>

"And that," she declared, turning to Snotlout, "is called the Hofferson. My mother and I spent three weeks perfecting it."

Snotlout, whose mood was suffering under his hangover, stared at the theoretically very dead target with disgruntled terror. "It's pretty good," he coughed, feigning confidence. Astrid grinned and went to retrieve her weapon.

"So how's your signature move coming along, Snot?" (She had always privately referred to Snotlout as Snot, but after his antics last night, it seemed like the only name for him.)

Fishlegs giggled from where he was drawing out a tournament bracket on the blackboard, in preparation for the day's event. Snotlout shot him a glare. "It's fine. It's in the draft stage right now. I don't want to show anyone because they might steal it." He strode over to where Hookfang was napping in the corner of the arena, and tried to get the unhappy dragon to stir.

Astrid exchanged an amused smile with Fishlegs. She had sort of missed torturing Snotlout. He was so easily wounded.

"Anyway," he added bitterly, "it's not like anyone cares about my signature move when Hiccup's got that dumb fire swordâ€"

Astrid swerved to look at him. "A fire sword?"

"Ugh, yeah, it's one of his nerd inventions."

Fishlegs chimed in excitedly, "Wait until you see it, Astrid, it's got a telescopic blade. It's amazing!"

She found herself gazing off in the direction of the forge. Hiccup and the twins were due to arrive any moment for warm-ups before the tournament. And he would be fighting today with the sword, which last time they'd spoken had been "just an idea." Her heart thudded against her ribcage and, feeling herself start to smile a smile that could only be described as giddy, she bit her lip. Giddy wasn't really the vibe she wanted to give off in front of Fishlegs and Snotlout.

"Sounds cool," she said finally, now watching the arena entrance, where she could hear someone approaching.

The arrival of Ruff and Tuff came as something of a letdown, particularly since she wasn't sure how much Ruffnut remembered of



their conversation from the previous night. She would tell Hiccup what had happened in her own good time, of course, but Ruff blabbing that Astrid had a secret about Southern men would make her look a lot more suspect than she actually wasâ€”because she hadn't done anything wrong! She would tell Hiccup, she would. Though, judging from the smart grin Ruff gave her, she needed to do it sooner rather than later.

But the other girl had no time to interrogate her, because Hiccup arrived on the twins' heels, and Toothless on his. "'Morning, gang," he called to the group, but she caught a hint of exhaustion under his outward cheer, and wondered how things had gone last night after he'd returned home with the chief.

Fishlegs stepped forward. "Hiccup, show Astrid Inferno, she hasn't seen it yet!"

Hiccup, his mouth hanging open, turned to look at herâ€”he was trying to determine if an apology was in order. Astrid folded her arms across her chest, grinning. "Yeah, Hiccup. Show me \_Inferno\_."

"Sure," he said slowly, and reached down to the holster strapped against his calf, which Astrid hadn't noticed during the day she'd been back. He pulled out a device she recognized from his sketchesâ€”it had been almost a year, but the design hadn't changed much. She continued to grin, strangely exhilarated by the sheepish expression on Hiccup's face. Goading him gave her a nice rush, and she decided not to consider how that might prove fun as their relationship progressed, tempted as she was to contemplate.

He flicked the button and, almost instantly, a pillar of flame grew from the hilt, taking the shape of a blade. The other teens flinched at the suddenness of it, but Astrid didn't move. Her breathing had gone ragged. It was a really magnificent weapon, and it looked brilliant in Hiccup's hand, like it was made for him to wield it. Which she supposed it had been. There was something hot clawing at her chest.

"Can it fight?" she inquired quietly.

Hiccup tried a few passes with the sword; he was agile, as of late. "I just reinforced the bolts this morning, so it should work, but I haven't strictly speaking tried it in combat."

Now unable to fight a smile, giddy or no, Astrid drew her axe. "Okay. Let's give it a go."

His mouth fell open again, and she heard what sounded like Tuffnut whooping in the background, but in that moment no one except Hiccup deserved her attention. It had never been clearer to her: they were the best. Not him, not her, \_them\_. Their togetherness functioned perfectly. She had made the right decision, coming back to Berk.

"Are you serious?" he asked, but he had moved into a defensive stance, and she prowled around him.

"I'm completely serious."



"If you get burnedâ€"

"Don't worry about that." Hiccup nodded. He sensed she didn't like the protectiveness, not in this context. He was a fast learner.

"If you insist," he conceded, and then attacked fast, confidently contradicting the reluctance in his tone.

She parried the first blow and landed a couple of her own, which he deflected. The heat of Inferno whipping by so near made them both sweat right away, but Astrid didn't mind. Her heart had gone from thudding against her ribcage to pounding in her throat, and she knew she was blushing, and not from embarrassment. She batted away thoughts of the muscular display visible just beneath his tunic, if she could only see through it, and swung at him; Hiccup ducked, then rolled back on to his feet.

She called to him as they drew away from each other, catching their breaths. "You kept practicing."

"Well," he heaved, giving a breathless bow, "wouldn't want to disappoint you, milady."

"You sound tired," she taunted.

"No." And he launched himself toward her again, in a series of quick slashes that nearly took her balance, but she managed to escape by dodging beneath his arm, ruffling his hair on her way out. A few passes later, a close call singed fur on one of her wristguards. This, this was amazing.

On the sidelinesâ€"this all went on in a public performance, with the tournament audience beginning to arrive in the standsâ€"Ruffnut turned to her brother, sounding disgusted. "Is this foreplay?"

Astrid managed to catch Inferno's hilt with a nook on her axe, and they threw their weights into their weapons, both determined to be the one to come out on top of this wrestling match. It was a battle of the wills, really, with a strip of fire crackling inches from their faces, wet hair sticking to their foreheads, panting noisily as metal grated on metal. Their eyes locked, too, and she saw something evident in Hiccup that she had only just glimpsed before. The realization, or impulse, or passionâ€"whatever it wasâ€"made her swear out loud, and he must've felt it too, because they broke away at the same time, his sword and her axe lowered to their sides.

"I'm skipping the tournament," he declared. Not once did her eyes leave his.

"Me too."

"Let's go, bud," he said, starting for Toothless, and she nodded to Stormfly. In a moment they were both on their dragons, heading for the exit.

"Bye?" said Fishlegs sadly, turning to his now defunct bracket.

The last thing Astrid heard was Snotlout's cry of "What was that?" before she and Stormfly zoomed out, hot Toothless's tail.



It was a familiar experience, to be zipping over Berk, going north, her chasing him, if more playfully now than nine months ago, when there had been something at stake. This time he did not attempt to call her off, but grinned under his arm every so often and kept Toothless just a dragon's length ahead. She recognized where they were headed: a small island. More like a few trees parked on a dirty rock than an island, really. The wind nipped at her face but she hardly felt it.

They landed hard and fast, him first and her a beat after, Hiccup dismounting smoothly in front of her. He adjusted his prosthesis just as she leapt from Stormfly and took two long strides before tackling him to the ground, the suddenness of it making both dragons scatter from their masters, who were now tangled in the dirt, a mess of kisses and heavy breathing.

After several minutes of impassioned snogging, he joked (doing nothing to disguise the hitch in voice when she pressed her lips against his neck), "This is doing a lot for my self-esteem."

Astrid sat up and whacked him in the chest. "Oh, shut it."

Mouth twisting, Hiccup squirmed a little. "Maybe I will, if you'd stop sitting on me like that." She glanced down: she was sitting \_right\_ above his hips. Ha.

"Oh?" She gave him a coy pout. "You don't like it?"

His eyes narrowed, and he put his hands over hers, starting to push her off. "Notâ€¦ not exactly, uhâ€¦" you know, I'm not really sure you understand how I feel about it?"

She was having the same sort of fun with this that she'd had in the arena earlier; it was new for her, and wonderful. Her favorite game, with added sex! An appeal to her pride, and her libido! (Said libido had been recently piqued, a little hormonal uptick, but it was enough for her reconceive of sex as something she might enjoy, rather than a random act, which oppressed her whether or not she got to partake in it.)

So she sat on Hiccup a little harder. He made a delightful, complex sound. Fun! Lowering her voice, she leaned toward him, and spoke slow. "I think I understand plenty."

Stunned into silence for a long beat, he stared up at her, wide-eyed, and then choked out, "Okay, that wasâ€¦"devastatingly sultry." She grinned, pleased at the success of her seductiveness, and he shook his head with renewed effort to escape from beneath her. "You're very attractive. Insanely attractive. Mind-numbingly attractive, in fact."

"Distractingly attractive, too?" she asked, and rolled off him, having lost the battle but not the war. Reminded of his father, Hiccup groaned as he sat up.

"Gods help me when he finds out I'm skipping the tournament. 'You have a civic duty, son,'" he said in that uncanny imitation of the chief's brogue, "'A chief puts the village before himself. A chief controls his feelings. A chief makes out with his \_duty\_, son.'"



Astrid snorted.

"Forget him. He's being ridiculous."

After their brief awkwardness last night (she thought for the time being Hiccup had learned not to compare their relationship to that of his mother and father), her support on this issue seemed to mean a lot to him, and his shoulders perceptibly lifted at her disavowal of Stoick's behavior.

"You think?"

Toothless approached them, eyeing his saddlebag, and gesturing for Hiccup to stay put, Astrid stood and retrieved two bits of salted cod. "In my experience, when parents are completely unreasonable, it's got more to do with them than it has with us." She tossed the treats to the dragons, who squawked their thanks. "Either that or your dad hates me, which I have to say isn't my favorite option. Do you have any idea what could be going on with him?"

Hiccup sighed. "Probably what's always going on with him, which is that I'm not the son he wanted." Toothless now wandered over to his master, and nudged him, prompting Hiccup to administer a neck rub. "Anyway, he's had seventeen years to get over it, I don't know why I thought things might be different now."

Astrid sat back beside him, and Toothless nudged her too before bounding after a rabbit. In a moment of bravery, she draped his arm around her shoulders. He shot her a curious but pleased look, and then let it happen, for which she was grateful—she wanted to slip quietly into intimacy, not have every milestone trumpeted as though she were a child learning to walk.

"Just ignore it," she told him. "He can't stop us." Which wasn't true, not in the slightest, but as long as they were alone like this, so far from everything, it seemed possible.

Hiccup assessed her critically, that thoughtful crease forming between his brows. "You ready to talk?"

Astrid glanced at the ground. She would have to tell him.

He took her hand in his, a little bashful. "Is that a no?"

"No, no, we can, I just—" With some effort, she met Hiccup's eye. "I need to tell you something that happened when I was travelling."

He stared at her, and then breathed, "Oh \_no\_," which told her exactly what she'd feared was true: Hiccup had spent nine months indulging in self-deprecating fantasies about her adventure, probably with the overtones of his various insecurities. Astrid meets a beefy guy who whisks her off her feet, etc. Gods, this was going to be hard.

"There's nothing to freak out about," she started, though perhaps this was not the best way to preface such a statement, "but when I was abroad, we visited this one—it was a kingdom, with a king. And we feasted with him and his whole court, it was—" She pursed her lips. "Well, okay, so this king asked for my hand in



marriage."

"WHAT?" shouted Hiccup, so loud that a flock of birds vacated the trees above them. Astrid was cringing.

"I didn't say yes!" she protested, with the quiet addendum, "though I didn't exactly say no." The king had been tall and thick-boned, like a blonde Snotlout, and he called her \_shieldmaiden\_. He'd said he wanted a shieldmaiden for a wife.

Hiccup got to his feet, stomping away from her. "So you're engaged?"

"I'm not engagedâ€"I am the furthest thing from engaged to this guy, it was justâ€" She stood, thinking to follow him, but he was pacing so furiously it struck her as a bad idea to get in the way of all that mental labor. "My mother said that I should keep my options open, because she knew you hadn't made me a commitment, and we're not noble-blooded so getting an offer from a king is, isâ€"and they let women inherit there, so my daughters, if I had any daughters, they could be the real deal." The stress of that day came back to her in waves, and how she'd imagined Hiccup's reaction, and how much worse it was to see it playing out like this. "So I said I had to come home first andâ€" maybe I'd come back and marry him. \_Which\_," she threw her hands up in surrender, "I'm obviously not going to do!"

Hiccup had stilled, his back to her, maybe looking out at the distant speck on the horizon that was Berkâ€" \_his\_ kingdom. Or, his chiefdom. As a Viking, he would never be able to call himself 'king'.

The lack of response made her pulse speed up. "Would you rather I hadn't told you?" she demanded.

"No."

"Please don't be angry." Someone needed to shake this boyâ€"or maybe she just hoped for a way to reset the conversation. "I came back, Hiccup. And it wasn't for Fishlegs."

He finally turned back to her, and the expression on his face might've punched a hole through her chest. "I didn't make you a commitment because you said you weren't ready." She went to him, wrapping herself around his torso, the comforting instinct perfectly natural after she'd had to put such effort into an arm around her shoulders.

"I know, and I wasn't ready. I wasn't," she said into his shirt. "My mom didn't know how things are, and this wasn't aboutâ€"this wasn't like it is with us, it was just about marriage."

Though she sensed some reluctance, he hugged her back, his voice by her ear. "So what's it about with us, if it's not about marriage, Astrid?"

The word that popped into her head began with an l and ended with an ove and she couldn't say it aloud just yet. Instead, she pulled away a little to see his face. "Partnership."

"How's that diffâ€" "



"It is." Hiccup glanced down—he already understood, even if she had to remind him. "Marriage is you paying my bride price, and having to tell the village, and me figuring out how in Thor's name I'm going to be the \_chief's wife\_." Exhausted by the thought, she pressed her ear to his chest. "Partnership is just—we. You know how little of that we're going to get? It'll be polygamy, you and me and all of Berk, living in domestic bliss." He laughed, shaking pleasantly against her.

"You're right. Okay." She felt his hands on her face, drawing it away so he could look at her. "So you don't want that right now."

Astrid shook her head.

"What \_do\_ you want, then?"

She hesitated, then countered, "What do \_you\_ want?"

"Well, ideally, Astrid, we get married and then I skive off half my responsibilities on you, so the tribe has at least half-competent leadership." With a scoff, she feigned pushing a grinning Hiccup away, and strode back to where they'd sat before. Slipping back into seriousness, he exhaled, and trailing after her. "I think I just want to know what you are to me. And if I know, I don't care who knows." They exchanged a small smile. "Could be the whole archipelago. Could be just you. Could be just you and Toothless and Stormfly," he amended, since the sunning dragons had begun to watching their masters, half-curious.

"The dragons always know," she thought outloud. What she was to Hiccup—she could do that, now. Or she thought she could try, at least. "All right." Astrid stuck her chin forward. "Then I'm your girlfriend."

A light came over Hiccup's face. "You are?"

"Yeah. I think so."

He shook his head furiously. "No, no 'think so,' you are or you aren't."

"Uh." Her nose wrinkling, she stomped in place once. "Okay. Okay. I am! I'm your girlfriend."

His grin was so big you could've forgotten the rest of his face existed at all—he was just Hiccup Haddock, the giant grin. "You know what that means?"

"What does it mean?" she played along, happiness rebounding between them.

"It means I'm your boyfriend."

Astrid's mouth popped open. Somehow in all this she had forgotten that once she conceded to be something to Hiccup, he immediately became something to her. So as much as she was losing a little autonomy, she was gaining some of his! Bizarre. It made her laugh.

"You are. You're my boyfriend, my boyfriend the chief's son. I did



well for myself, didn't I?" She punched him in the gut. "And you're handsome, too, this is great!"

"You think I'm handsome?" he wheezed, gripping his stomach.

"No, I think you're hideous, that's why I chased you here and pinned you down to kiss you."

He started to giggle and, recovering himself, pulled her to him. "Then it's a good thing you don't have to suffer the public embarrassment of dating me. Not yet, at least."

"I really am lucky," she muttered, and kissed him. "Now, let's pretend we're already in charge and not go home 'til dark. Just between us."

He grinned, agreeing, "Just between us."

## 8. Back To Bite You

A/N: So your friendly author had three papers due this past week and no time for any Fun writing. Here, finally, is a chapter. I might put up another in the next 1-2 days. Notably, I've gone from switching POVs from chapter to chapter to just seamlessly integrating the swaps. Thought that was nice and symbolic, hope it makes sense to you all.

\* \* \*

><p>Snotlout won the tournament, but it came with less praise and attention than in years before; the Hooligans talked not about who'd competed but about who hadn't.<p>

Astrid and Hiccup's privacy concerns might've been better served had they considered them before running off in front of all their friends and more than a few villagers. But, foresight rarely lends itself to passion. By the time they arrived back to Berk, the sun was receding behind the horizon line, people were beginning to gather in the Great Hall for the second night of festivities, and Snotlout was sitting on Hiccup's front steps with a sword across his lap and a terrible glower on his face.

"Snotlout," said Hiccup when he came upon his cousin, half-greeting, half-apprehensive exclamation (he'd had a few nightmares that started this way). He and Astrid had returned in strategic separation, but he nonetheless felt the eyes of passing Hooligans on his back. And Snotlout's eyes on his front. Specifically the neck area. That was sort of weird. Not good, he suspected.

Snotlout rose from the steps, frown twitching. Hiccup had to swallow the urge to back away—"how many lunches and best toys had he given up to Snotlout's brutish intimidation over the years? Old habits, new Hiccup. He stood his ground.

"What's up, Snotlout?"

"Are you with Astrid?" Oh, great. \_This, \_already.

He cleared his throat and put on an innocent voice, scuffing his boot



in the dirt. "What? Me and Astrid? Sheâ€¦ You know that's never going to happen." His lips pursed, remembering the weight of Astrid's.

"She's kissed you. Twice." Snotlout was making an effort not to sound hurt, but a weakened pride snagged the end of his words. Hiccup felt a pang of guilt, though Astrid was not the Thawfest, which he'd thrown to appease Snot's ego: without an ego, what did Snotlout have? Patchy budding facial hair? He certainly hadn't turned out as tall as everyone had hoped.

"Well," said Hiccup, "What's kissing got to do with anything, really?"

"Everything," growled Snotlout, rightly.

But Hiccup shrugged, starting to slip past him into the house. "Some would say."

Suddenly, with a grunt, Snotlout slammed his sword into the earth, making Hiccup start. "You are with her."

Indignation flared within himâ€"after all, what right did Snot even have to be upset? Astrid didn't belong to him, she had never reciprocated his advances, and after years of them! If anything, Astrid ought to be upset with Snotlout, not the other way around (though, as clear as she'd made her disinterest, he couldn't recall her ever insisting Snotlout stop; what was that?)â€"only now that Snot had to confront the possibility of Astrid being with someone else could he see he'd been rejected. Hiccup did not need to pity him for something that had happened years ago, even if he had only just realized it.

"It doesn't matter if I am," he snapped. Snotlout looked briefly surprised, then furious. "Astrid's life isn't any of your business. If it were, you'd be talking to her right now, and not me."

Something peculiar flashed in Snot's eyes and he ripped his sword from the ground, then stomped off wordlessly. Relieved, Hiccup collapsed against the house. That wouldn't be the last of Snotlout, he guessed, but in the meantime he could breathe. Now he thought, turning to go inside, if only he could avoid his father too.

He could not avoid his father. And Stoick was angry.

And Stoick yelledâ€"they had fought more in two days than they'd fought in two years, it felt. You left the tournament, your people need to see you participate, everything you do shows what kind of chief you'll be one day and you don't want to be the kind of chief who runs off with a woman in the middle of the most important festival in years. Hiccup said what he'd said every time: don't I get some allowance for being young? Can't you remember when you were my age? All of it fell on deaf ears, and he started to suspect Astrid was right, that this was his father's dilemma projected on to him. But he couldn't understand what that projection meant for him and Astrid, for his faint understand of what his parents' marriage had been. His father left without letting them resolve anything, making Hiccup swear he'd attend the party that night.



Which Astrid would've dragged him to, anyway, if only because it gave them an excuse to spend time together without sneaking around. The euphoria of an incredible afternoon kept floating through her; she even sat on the steps to the Great Hall, waiting for Hiccup to appear in the spools of torchlight illuminating the path. And there he wasâ€”looking dour.

"Hi?" she asked, throwing him a puzzled glance.

"Hi," he echoed, and at once she knew he had fought with Stoick again. She could almost hear the big man's voice above the din of the feast behind her. "Say," he lowered his voice, "you want to ditch this and go for a night flight, or something?"

Astrid shook her head. "You're avoiding him, that's a bad idea, it'll only make things worse."

"Well, Iâ€”" he blustered, then plopped down on the steps beside her. "What else am I supposed to do? Every move I make is wrong. I go left, he says right. I stand up, he sits down." He raised his hands, a plea to Odin. "Are we actually related, is what I'm wondering."

"You're exaggerating," she told him gently.

"I am exaggerating," he agreed, "but it still feels like that, sometimes." Astrid bit her lip: she'd had an idea, but it seemed reckless, possibly insane, considering they didn't know exactly what Stoick's problem wasâ€”

"ASTRID!"

She spun aroundâ€”Snotlout was tripping down the steps, sloshing mead down his front, drunk off his arse. She heard Hiccup groan, "For Odin's sake, not now."

"Snotlout?" Stifling a laugh, she got to her feet when he stopped at the foot of the stairs.

"What are you doing, Astrid?" seethed their intoxicated friend. "Look at him!" He gestured wildly at Hiccup, showering him with alcohol and spit. "YOU COULD SNAP HIM LIKE A TWIG!"

"Go home, Snotlout, or we'll dunk you in the well," she said simply. Hiccup was blushing.

"I've seen his manhood," Snot continued, his face blotched red, "it was like a little boy's! Granted, we were six, so I guess we were little boys, but it can't haveâ€”"

"SNOTLOUT," roared Hiccup, on his feet. Astrid nearly fell over. "Go home right now." She stared at his profile, ringed in firelight. For a moment he had sounded like someone else entirelyâ€”like his father, like Stoick.

Snotlout made a few spluttering sounds and glared at them. "All right, Chief," he spat, and stumbled off into the night.

They remained silent, staring at the spot where Snot had disappeared. Hiccup's face stayed contorted with anger, then began easing into



annoyance, his brow worried. She wondered if any villagers had overheard the incident, or if they'd notice her reach out to touch him reassuringly. And then she did it anyway, putting a hand on his arm.

The gesture seemed to pull Hiccup from his furious daydream, and he gave her a weak smile. "Sorry."

"Did you put Snotlout up to that?"

"Of course not!"

"Then there's no reason for you to apologize."

Hiccup's mouth hung open, the tops of his ears going red. "I guess not." Astrid weighed what she was about to ask for a long time—longer than she typically weighed statements, at least. It was important. There were things he might misinterpret; he had so much trouble with the way people looked at him, sometimes. She could understand that.

"So," she began, "you know I don't care about—"

"You know what," said Hiccup loudly, starting up the stairs into the hall, "I think I heard Tuffnut reciting poetry. I wouldn't miss that for the world, would you, Astrid?" Pausing, he gave her a significant look. A look that didn't want to talk about manhood in any sense of the word.

Astrid frowned at him, but the look was so persistent—she shook it off, and went past him.

Behind her, Hiccup muttered something that sounded an awful lot like, "Not until we're married," and Astrid let out a violent snort. Well, well. There was a project.

That night, and the next five, flew by in a rapid successive pattern: a morning of gaming, an afternoon of eating, and an evening of drinking. Snotlout solidly ignoring both of them. Astrid knew they couldn't run off again, and Hiccup supposed he knew too, even if his submission to this wisdom was reluctant. He had entered those teenage years where compromising with his father's faults reeked of injustice. But Astrid, out of her element, did well as peacekeeper. They had their own ways of being stubborn.

So instead they stayed sober and slipped out around two or three when the booze started putting people to sleep, and went out to the unlit fire pit and kissed and talked. Hiccup heard all the stories she had to tell, like he'd wanted.

And Winter Nights was over. Which just left them with winter.

Not a week into the new season, Hiccup came back from his and Astrid's first mapping trip in nearly a year to find Stoick in the forge, hovering over his worktable. The fire crackled but Gobber had gone for the night, and Hiccup wondered how long his father had waited for him here.

"Son," he started softly. They had barely been speaking. Hiccup approached with caution.



"Hi, Dad." He hugged the brown leather book that held the map close to his chest; he had not had the heart to work on it with Astrid gone, this was its first outing in months.

Stoick cleared his throat, eyes trained on the fire, and retrieved a sheet of parchment tucked into his belt. "I received a letter today. From the Berserker tribe. An apology from Dagur the Deranged himself."

Hiccup's stomach dropped. It had been a year since he'd last seen Dagur, nowâ€"last thing he'd heard, the Berserker tribe had mutinied and put in a bloke called Karl as their new chief. "Dagur's back?"

"Aye," said his father slowly. "And he apologizes for the kidnapping of my heir." Wait. Something dawned on Hiccup. "Nowhere," Stoick added, a little louder, "does this letter mention the goddess Freya, or Astrid. No plan to build a temple in her honor. Nothing." For the first time, he met Hiccup's eye. It was not good. "What do you make of that, son?"

The deception seemed distant to Hiccup, committed for vague reasons related to pleasing Astrid. Now it would bite him.

"I'm sorry."

"You lied," breathed Stoick.

"I didn't meanâ€" "

"A matter of politics, of war, of the tribe! And you lied, forâ€" "

"They wanted to take Astrid, Dad!" Hiccup cried, with enough passion to quell Stoick's ranting for a momentâ€"he had not heard this side of the story. "Ruffnut spread this rumor that we were together, and Dagur heard, and, and he thought if he took Astrid he could get to me, so she was nearly killed a bunch of times and it was my fault, they were hurting her because of me, except one timeâ€"one time I tried to step in and he actually got me too, soâ€" "

"You lied to protect Astrid," Stoick said, inscrutable. He might've been remarking on the weather. Hiccup fell silent, heart in his throat. "I knew you were lying," he remarked, mostly to himself. "Astrid is involved and all of a sudden you're keeping things from me. Lying. Forgetting your duties. Compromising your integrity."

"I don't mean it that way," Hiccup whispered, not even sure if his father could hear. Stoick moved to the window, where you could just make out the beacons burning in Hooligan Bay. The word integrity rang in his ears and he thought of Astrid touching him after he fought with Snotlout, how there had been something strange in her voice, of the way she spoke and moved when they were alone sometimes, I understand plenty was what she had said, of how he didn't want to disappoint herâ€" "

"You'll go to Berserker Island as an envoy and conduct the negotiations for a new peace treaty."



Face burning, he felt more sick than innocent. The prospect of seeing Dagur again struck him as far and away difficult enough for one punishment, but he sensed this was not all his father had to say on the matter. And Stoick went on,

"One day, Hiccup, you'll have to choose between your tribe and yourself." The moon had come out and it highlighted the newly silvered strands in Stoick's beard. "What you want and what your people need. It'll be hard enough as is. And harder if you start young."

What did that mean? That he was supposed to cut himself off from all kinds of personal fulfillment? "So you're saying," Hiccup did very little not to sound disgruntled, "that because I love her and I'd do anything for her, I shouldn't marry her. I should marry someone I loveâ€"less?"

"Having never been in a loveless marriage, I cannot recommend one, son." The chief's anger had dissipated, returned to some recessive pool to which Hiccup possessed special access. One of those father-son privileges you always hear about, except that Hiccup's involved getting screamed at in a heavy accent. "But." Stoick pulled a hammer from the forge wall and tested it in his hand. "Until you're ready to pay the bride price and set a date, stay away from the girl. She's said she'll marry you?"

Hiccup blushed. Marriage seemed like the least important of the things Astrid had promised him. And she was very good about keeping promises, he'd noticed. "Uh, well, yes? I guess?"

"Then why should you see her before the wedding night?" asked Stoick, an ice in his voice that Hiccup hadn't heard in years, since before he'd fought the Red Death.

His head shook reflexively. Unbelievable. His dad had changed, he was good now, he understood how Hiccup was different and what he needed.

"Because," he started, but he would not be able to explain why he should see Astrid. He couldn't communicate that it was Astrid who had convinced him to follow the Hooligan fleet to Dragon Island years ago, who had kept him from being helplessly beaten in front of the Berserk army, who persuaded him to build the sword that even Stoick found impressive. These were massive ideas, needing care and deconstruction; he didn't have time, no words came out.

"Then it's settled," said Stoick, swinging the hammer back up on the wall. "I'll speak to Phlegma to see if she can't help make things a little easier from Astrid's end."

"This is ridiculous, Dad."

"So marry her now."

Hiccup could not speak. Not enough time.

His father turned to leave. "As I thought. Goodnight, son."

The next morning, Astrid drove her axe into one of the few trees on their island, nearly felling it. "That is so ridiculous."



"I know," groaned Hiccup, from where he was prostrate on the ground, Toothless leaning over him curiously. "I \_know\_, bud, it's insane. My dad has lost it."

"Something is definitely up with him," Astrid announced to the half-dead tree. "He's seen me throw an axe and he still thinks the only thing I can do for you is bear sons. That's justâ€¦|\_weird\_."

Hiccup started to pull himself up off the ground. "What if we just left?"

"What?"

"What if we ran away?" He went to her, nearly serious. "You, me, Toothless, Stormfly. Living off the land. Discovering new dragons. I'd never need to be chief. You'd never need to be the chief's wife. It'd be great, we could do whatever we want!"

"Snotlout would be chief," she observed dryly, but Hiccup only shrugged. Astrid chewed her lip and moved away from him, to get her axe out of the trunk. She murmured, "I \_want\_ to be chief's wife one day. I'd probably want to be chief, if that were possible."

"We're not leaving," he said, agreeing with her implicit answer, but he still sounded as if he'd fly off at any minute, should Astrid change her mind. Hiccup had a restless streak, and she thought for the first time that it ought to frighten herâ€"but no. He wasn't going anywhere. He might dream of far off places, but he would never leave Berk. She knew from personal experience that leaving only lead to coming back, when you had somewhere that was really \_home\_.

"Okay, fine," Astrid sighed, as if worn down after a long persuasion. "I'll talk to your dad!"

Hiccup tripped over an exposed root and tumbled into Toothless. "\_What\_?"

"I'll talk to him and set him straight, and then we can see each other again." Glancing at their surroundings, she added, "Non-secretly." She'd considered this option during Winter Nights, too, but had become too distracted by Snotlout's whining to give it total consideration. Now it seemed like the best and only option for them, like she'd been holding on to the storm-in-and-demand-justice-from-the-chief card for the whole game and had finally found the perfect round to play it. A gear had clicked into place. A switch had flipped on in her head.

"You can't \_do\_ that, Astrid!"

She had started for Stormfly but he blocked her way, arms waving, making Astrid frown and dodge the gesticulating. "Why not?"

"Because my dad is the \_chief\_, and he's already angry, and he'll know that we've been spending time together when he just said we couldn'tâ€" "

"Hiccup, I could count on one hand the number of times your dad and I



have said more than three words to each other." She waved a hand at him, as if to demonstrate. "So, he clearly doesn't really know me, or know what I'm capable of. And I'll show him." She pulled herself on to her dragon, Hiccup watching, somewhat stricken.

When she'd settled into her saddle, they locked eyes. His expression was grave.

"I can do it," she insisted.

After a long pause, Hiccup demanded, "And what if he says I can't marry you after all?"

Withholding her reply, Astrid leaned down and kissed him. "Then," she said, pulling away, "I'll run away as far as you'd like to go."

## 9. Different

A/N: Man, I'm fast. This was Herculean. We are getting into the meaty, angsty, subtextual stuff that I love. Enjoy.

\* \* \*

><p>She found her boyfriend's father at the docks, overseeing the loading of a ship—the envoy to Berserker Island, maybe, which would leave tomorrow at dawn. The sun glinted off the top of his helmet: he stood two feet taller than Astrid, three times as wide, his back to her looking out over the harbor. Her initially determined steps grew slower as she traversed the pier: she had nearly forgotten that her boyfriend's father was also the chief of their tribe, the highest authority on their island beneath the gods, a man who could banish her at will. A man who felt she'd put the integrity of his heir under fire.<p>

"Chief," she managed, and he started to turn. "I'd like to speak to you as—a concerned citizen of Berk."

He gazed down at her, expression mostly obscured by explosive facial hair, but she thought she saw his eyebrows twitch. "Speak, then, Astrid." The last time they'd spoken he had only grunted her name and said to get out, so while this greeting did not ring of fondness, it was at least a small improvement.

"I—| " She glanced down into the half-laden boat, where some workers had slowed their progress to watch the exchange. Understandable, it was not everyday you saw a girl of seventeen have an audience with the chief. She began to see why that was. Stoick frowned at her hesitation—"no more waiting, okay. "It's about Hiccup, sir," she blurted.

At once, his frown deepened. He turned back to the ship. "Aye, of course it is."

When Stoick climbed on board, Astrid scrambled after him. "Sir, it's very important, please."

"I've forbidden him to see you, Astrid."

"I know—" "



Stoick swung around to face her, and demanded, knowing the answer, "How did you know?"

"He saw me anyway," she admitted.

"Aye, what else?" The far-away rage in Stoick's eyes (he was thinking of all he would say to his son later, she guessed) made clear to Astrid why Hiccup always acted so downtrodden after their fights. Even the tempered tone he used now sounded halfway to a roar—"she was almost too frightened to proceed. Almost.

"You need to stop treating him like this, sir," she declared.

Stoick stopped moving, but for the rise and fall of his chest, the rustling of his beard with each breath. The angle of his brow made an arrow, trained right between her eyes by the keenness of his glare, but more than any other moment of her life it was here essential not to look away.

For Hiccup, and for Berk, and most importantly for herself, she raised her chin, and glared right back.

Her demand had carried over the ship's deck, to the sailors who paused their work and were now creeping away, back on to the pier and toward the village, where they might avoid the encroaching bloodbath.

"You," his voice might've shaken the wood beneath their feet, "would give your chief an order?"

"I would," she whispered, still meeting his eye, but she heard the tremor in her words.

Scowl fixed, Stoick let out a low sigh that stirred Astrid's bangs. He turned, and went to the edge of the ship, watching the outlines of dragons fluttering around the village above them. But he did not speak.

Astrid glanced hastily around the deck, unsure of this development, but took a creeping step toward Hiccup's father.

"I know you think that the way Hiccup acts because of me is going to screw him up as chief." She put forth this statement experimentally, and got no response, so she went on. "But it only means that he goes with his heart, and that's going to make him a great chief—really," she insisted, observing the skeptical stir of Stoick's shoulders. "I think, maybe a few years ago, I would have thought—" Hiccup with all his questions, beating her in the Kill Ring, explaining himself in too many words. "I would have thought that made him weak, but Hiccup isn't weak, sir, you know that yourself, you've seen—" "

"A good chief does not lead with his heart," Stoick interrupted, gripping the ship's railing. "It's naïve to think so, Astrid—"

"And that's why he needs me." The chief looked at her again, surprised, and she drew herself up as tall as she felt. "To tell him when he's being stupid. I can do that."



Stoick hesitated, and then leaned harder into the rail, squinting at the sea. Astrid waited, she did not shuffle her feet.

After an extended silence, the chief told her, "Hiccup's mother thought our war with the dragons was unnecessary violence. It was many years ago, and everyone has forgotten she felt that way, even the ones who haven't forgotten her, everyone except me. She was right." He drew a deep breath; he had such presence that every inhale might have impacted the weather patterns. She felt strangely honored—she sensed this was a story Stoick did not often share. "Had I listened to her, she might still be alive. But the way her mind worked was so different from my own, I couldn't conceive of it."

She opened her mouth, wanting to protest somehow, but she couldn't place what it was about this that struck her as false. It reminded her of how Hiccup twisted situations so he might carry the responsibility on his own shoulders, a sort of masochistic honor. The exact sort of behavior she'd tell him was stupid, given the chance.

"You and my son are very different," said Stoick, with finality. It was not untrue, they had told one another this time and time again. Funny, Hiccup too said it like a bad thing, and she'd had to correct him. What was it about these Haddock men, putting everything in apocalyptic terms?

She shook her head. "With all due respect, sir, you don't know me that well. And you don't know Hiccup like I know him."

"You think I don't know my own son?" he snapped, a surge of anger. He didn't expect her to keep fighting, which only proved Astrid's point: they were almost strangers.

"No, you just know him differently from how I know him, just like he knows me differently from the way my mom does." She had a passing thought about how hers and Hiccup's son might be, how one day she would have to confront this alternate perspective, to accept that she and her child would only ever know certain parts of one another. "We're different," she agreed, a smile finding the corners of her mouth, "but we're similar, too. Otherwise we'd have nothing to talk about."

"You and Hiccup do a lot of talking, do you?" he asked incredulously.

Her cheeks went hot. "Yeah, actually, we do. We talk all the time."

Sounding a little more resigned, he said, "All right." She didn't know what that meant, that she had convinced him, or that she ought to stop, now. So Astrid decided neither, and pressed on.

"I listened to him." She leaned over the rail, to make him look at her. "I rode a dragon. I changed."

Stoick met her eye reluctantly, then shrugged. "Boar-headed," he muttered.



"I'll listen to him," she swore, "and I'll make him listen to me! We'll change when we need to."

"I've no doubt you could make him listen to you," snorted the chief, and Astrid grinned.

"Can I keep seeing him?"

"Aye," groaned Stoick, waving her away. "If engagement's out of the question, I don't see how I can stop you."

"Only for now. Thank you, sir!" She gave his massive forearm a hug, and started to leave her astonished future father-in-law, but remembered something and darted back: "Oh, and, sir, please don't tell anyone we're together, it's sort of a secret."

"Can't tell anyone about what I don't see, so don't let me see it."

Fighting a laugh, she nodded vigorously. "Aye, sir."

She had turned to go when he added, "And you'll accompany the envoy tomorrow. Consider it a trial run. Convince me, Astrid."

"Okay," she said, the grin sliding from her face. All that progress and she wasn't in yet? She could feel her patience threatening to break, but managed to hold her tongue and head back to the village without chopping anything in half.

Hiccup was waiting for her in the arena—well, actually, he was discussing some dragon species thing with Fishlegs, who had the dragon book out, but in effect he was waiting for her. Or so she thought, until he seemed too involved in a speech about the prospect of a four-winged dragon to even notice her arrival.

"\_Hiccup\_."

He swung around, slack-jawed. Always so amazed to see her. "Astrid. Hi." It occurred to him where she was coming from, and he glanced at Fishlegs. "How'd it go? Should we talk somewhere else?"

"I'm going with you tomorrow."

He frowned, not understanding, and then his eyes grew wide. "To Berserker Island? What?"

"Your dad said so," she cringed.

"Hello?" said Fishlegs from behind them, somewhat pathetic. "Guys?"

"Fishlegs, could you run up to the forge for me?" asked Hiccup, not taking his eyes off Astrid.

"And get what?"

"I don't know, just run up there. Tell Gobber I'll be into work later."

"You guys are acting so weird," Fishlegs sobbed, but he scampered out



of the arena with the dragon book under his arm.

Astrid watched him go. "We have to be careful about that kind of thing. We want our privacy, but we can't be alienating people."

A little red flashed in his cheeks, but he shook his head, resolving not to get caught up in anything other than the issue at hand. "Okay, but what happened with my dad? Fishlegs will be fine, this is important."

She threw him a quick frown. "So is that." But she couldn't get anywhere with Hiccup on this, not right now, judging from the look on his face. "It went well, he justâ€¦ he thought we weren't going to make a good team because we're different, which is dumb, yeah. And I thought I had him convinced, but then right when I was leaving, he said I had to go with you to Berserker Island, as a trial run."

Hiccup's face lit up. "So that's great," he said, taking her hands in his, "we'll just go together and negotiate the new treaty, and my dad will see what a good team we make, and everything will be fine!"

Astrid's eyebrow flicked upward. "I think you're forgetting the part where I nearly killed Dagur the last time I saw him."

A cloud came over Hiccup's expression and he let go of her. "You didn't kill him."

She stifled an eye rollâ€"easier than being upset, because it felt as though a part of him that hadn't forgive her for what she'd done that day, even without the follow-through. \_Get over it\_, she wanted to scream, though she knew he had the moral high ground. Instead she joked, "You know, the weird thing is that, rage-wise, there's usually not a whole lot of difference between killing someone and almost killing them?"

"You spared him!"

"It won't matter, Hiccup," she said seriously. "I'll have to hang back in the ship or the negotiation will be ruined."

The muscles in Hiccup's jaw twitched dangerously. He needed a better blade for shaving, there was stubble on his chin; the thought gave her a surge of affection she had to squash in this moment of tension. "Then my dad is right. We're not a good team."

She shrugged dismissively. "That's not what that means."

"Doesn't it? If we can't take responsibility for one another's faults \_together\_, doesn't that mean we're not working well with each other?"

Outwardly, she glared at him. Inwardly, she murmured, \_Gods, he's good at this arguing thing\_. "I've changed since then," she pointed out.

"So prove it, and talk to Dagur with me."

At this titillating jibeâ€"he was standing close to her,



bristlingâ€”she gave him a smile, coy, inscrutable. Her, negotiating a treaty at Hiccup's side. Either way, Dagur or no Dagur, it was in her future. And she was no longer the girl who could only be stopped from killing a man at the sound of her friend's pleading voice, she had grown a little taller and a lot bigger. Ironically she had also become exactly what they'd once thought her to be, Hiccup's girlfriend, but that felt like the least important development. Dagur would not dare to call her \_girl\_, not now.

"Okay, I'll prove it," she told him, still smiling that coy smile. Hiccup narrowed his eyes at her.

"Why do I feel like I'm missing something?"

"I don't know what you mean," she lied happily.

"Astrid," he began, a reprimanding note in his tone, but she spun on her heel and bounced toward the exit.

"We probably shouldn't be seen together anymore today, bye!"

And it was very weird. Yes, it was all very weird and strange for Hiccup, who sort of felt like his father and Astrid and Fishlegs and all the Hooligans on Berk were prodding him each with little wooden sticks, and every time he managed to swat one away someone else got him at a different angle, so he was just doing this stupid flinching dance constantly, and one day he would have no recourse but to fall over and weep to himself.

After an afternoon in the forge, he went for a long flight with Toothless, thinking of the strange argument with Astrid, and then had dinner with the rest of the riders in the hallâ€”she was conspicuously absent and no one mentioned it, and he couldn't ask about her without risking a bunch of tawdry jokes from the twins and a smack in the face from Snotlout, who he had caught glowering at him more than once in the past couple of weeksâ€”yet another stick in his side.

At home, his father was asleep by the fire, which might've been the best thing to happen to Hiccup all day if he hadn't tripped over a stray bit of armor and woken up not only Stoick but likely their neighbors as well.

The great chief of the Hooligan tribe sat up in his armchair and yawned a yawn so big that his whole face was, for a moment, a cavernous mouth. Hiccup heard a sound from his bedroom above their headsâ€”Toothless had just yawned, too. He managed a laugh.

Stoick saw him, and waved groggily. "'Evening, son."

"Long day?"

"Aye."

A pause and he met his father's gaze across the room. The friendliness faded. "Goodnight," said Hiccup stiffly, not wanting to talk about it, and he went for the stairs. An end to this day sounded like easiest thing for which to hope.

But it did not end there, because when he opened the door to his



room, Astrid was sitting on his bed, humming to herself.

"Aâ€" he started to say, but she put a finger to her smirking lips and gestured downward. His dad. He shut the door quietly, and then addressed her urgently.

"What are you \_doing\_?"

Astrid grinned at him, and he realized she didn't quite look herselfâ€"her boots were off, exposing small white feet that she tucked behind her knees as she sat cross-legged, the thick fur hood he'd made her many months ago hung with her shoulder armor from the corner post of his bed. Her hair was half-loose, and she went back to unbraiding it now. It fell to her hips in an off-yellow deluge.

"Hello to you too," she said, smiling.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, and turned to Toothless, who was stretched out over his bed. "Did you let this happen?" The dragon squawked noncommittally, and then went back to sleep.

"He likes me," Astrid explained, rising from the bed, the intensity of her attention making him feel more than a bit nauseous. "He has good taste."

"Eh, well, can't disagree with that." Somehow his eyes were on the ceiling now. Like if he looked at Astrid, who stood a foot away from him with a curious expression on her face, he might spontaneously combust.

"You're not going to kiss me?"

"I could, I guâ€" "

"You're not going to look at me?"

Wincing, he shut his eyes, lowered his chin, and opened them again. He saw rosy cheeks and not much else before Astrid pressed her lips to his. Her hand found his, and he felt himself being dragged somewhereâ€"in the direction of the bed. A heat came over him, followed by a bone-deep chill, and he instantly jerked out of the embrace, stumbling away from her.

"Ah, ha, wow, Astrid, shouldn't you be heading home, now, your mom is going to worry."

Assessing him with a look of amusement and (terrifyingly) confidence, Astrid shook her head. "You know, I really don't think she will."

"You sure?" he croaked, voice soaring octaves. Shrill enough to break glass, probably, if he'd had any glass to break.

"Hiccup," said Astrid flatly, reaching out to him. "It'll be fine."

"No it won't," he replied automatically, refusing her hand, and he scrambled to collect her things from the room. His pulse was going crazy, he was sure he'd gone bright red. "We need to be up early."



I'll see you then." He tried to deposit the boots and armor in her arms but she folded them resolutely across her chest, and everything clattered to the floor, noisier than he would've guessed.

On the first floor something creaked loudly, and they froze. There were a number of quiet thumps, each louder than the last, and then a familiar voice called up the stairs, "Everything all right, son?"

Hiccup tossed Astrid a glare, and went to crack the door open. He called down, "It's fine, I was talking to Toothless and I knocked something over."

"Sleep well, then," said Stoick, a little sad. Hiccup didn't have time to feel guilty about that, too. The thumping sounds receded. When he turned around, Astrid was tugging on her boots.

"I guess the mood's passed anyway," she said, attempting nonchalance, but she was hurt. He heard the edge of distress in her voice, and could have kicked himself, whether or not he was right, which he wasâ€"had been, both times. They had fought twice today, real fights. The disparity between moments like this in the heart of Berk, and the hours they could spend together in the middle of nowhere, unsettled him. What did that mean for their future? What was he supposed to do if he and Astrid couldn't work together and be together?

As she was climbing out of the window, he managed to get out, "Sorry, Astrid," but he heard no reply before she leapt down.

Tomorrow they would have to convince Dagur not to wage war on them, when they could hardly keep from waging war on each other. Perhaps his father had been right to posit a testâ€"perhaps his father had been right about a lot of things.

## 10. Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

A/N: Everything's going to be fineeeeeeee.

\* \* \*

><p>As they loaded the ship for Berserker Island the next morning, Astrid didn't look at Hiccup, Hiccup didn't look at Stoick, and Gobber watched the three of them passing each other in such frigid silence that he was eventually prompted to say, to no one in particular, "Why can't we all just get along?"<p>

If Stoick sensed that something had soured between Astrid and Hiccup since she'd so ardently pleaded their togetherness with him yesterday, he did not show it. But why should he, really, when it was what he'd expected? She had failed to hear Hiccup and he had rejected her. Fracture.

No, no. She was getting ahead of herself.

It had been an argument, couples argued, they made up, they moved forward. As she said goodbye to Stormflyâ€"the dragons would stay behind, Hiccup didn't trust Dagur around themâ€"she resolved to talk to him, to swallow her pride and say her piece. Or attempt it, at



least. They were on a freaking expedition to test their teamwork skills, and they weren't speaking; she had to try.

But between his avoidance and the stress of the impending visit to Dagur, she spent the first two hours of the journey too overwhelmed to do anything other than sit in the dark hold and guide a whetstone rhythmically over the blade of her axe. She tried to empty her mind, but kept coming back to her hasty departure from the Haddock house the night before, the bruise on her leg from where she dropped too quickly from the window, the chill on her neck before she managed to get on her hood. It was only once she'd sustained a nasty slice to her finger that she grunted, sheathed the weapon, and headed above deck. Here goes.

Hiccup hung over the rail toward the front of the ship, watching its creaking prow slink through the waves. She crept over and stood behind him on the deck, hands clasped, her mouth wound into an apologetic smile.

"You remember the last time we sailed to Berserker Island?"

Hiccup looked up. There were dark circles beneath his bright green eyes.

"Yeah," he said reluctantly, but it was more than they'd spoken all morning. Oddly enough, she remembered him trying to apologize as she'd left the night before—"now the roles were reversed. Maybe they'd slept weird. They'd slept alone, anyway.

"It's funny, because," she said, conversational, coming to lean on the rail beside him, "then, I was mad at you, and you had to make me tell you why. And now you're mad at me." Astrid dug a nail into the grain of the ship's wood. "But I know why you're mad."

His eyes were trained on a speck in the distance, their destination. The wind twirled and smoothed his hair in and out of little spikes. When he spoke, frustration distorted his words into blips of anger surfacing from his throat. "So why am I mad, Astrid?"

"Because I didn't listen to you." He inhaled sharply at her side. "I bragged to your dad about how well I listen, I guess I got cocky." In the arena, she'd walked away from him, too distracted by the thought of proving herself as a woman to hear his doubt: in a moment where he needed reassurance and candor, she'd pulled into some stupid sexy mind game. What had happened in the bedroom shouldn't have come as a surprise, not when he had so much else on his mind, but she had expected—that he wouldn't be able to control himself. And if he'd been any other man, maybe he couldn't have, but this was Hiccup. How worried his father had been that he'd lose his wits to her beguiling, how antithetical that seemed now.

He turned to her, eyes closed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I know you're independent, and you're proud of that, and I'm proud of it too, Astrid." His hand fell away from his face, uncovering a woeful expression. "But I need you to talk to me. Just let me in on your decisions every once and a while, and maybe I can let you know which ones aren't going to work for me, like—"like that one, for example."

Astrid tugged on her bangs. The moment of rejection had been fast and



potent and it made her chest ache, even retroactively. "I'll try," she offered.

"No more schemes?"

"I can't promise that," she joked half-heartedly, but it was good enough for Hiccup, whose gaze softened.

"I'm sorry Iâ€| But he had seen how many people were on the ship with themâ€"at least four or five of Stoick's men, some of them crew, others body guards. "Sorry for how I reacted," he explained, censoring his tone.

"It's okay," she said softly. Hiccup nudged her hand with his, and when she looked up, he was smiling. Her mouth opened. "You're very forgiving of me." This statement escaped her without consideration, and it caught him off guard, by the looks of it.

"What do you mean?"

"I just feel like I'm always messing up, or needing something, and you're always beingâ€"the best about it."

Hiccup scanned her, a small puzzled part between his lips. "Astrid, don't feel that way."

She gave him a skeptical look. "Sure, I'll just stop feeling this way, right now, okay, there, it's gone?"

"Iâ€| He sighed, still eyeing the others on board uncomfortably. "I always feel like I need something too. I feel like I ask too much of you, to say exactly what you mean all the time even when you don't know. To help me do this leadership stuffâ€"this guy," he gestured in the direction of Berserker Island, "tried to \_kill\_ you because of me."

"Not your fault," she murmured.

"But you still had to go through it, all because you had the good luck to fall for \_me\_."

"I fell for you, huh?" Astrid repeated, almost kidding. He shot her an apologetic look bordering on the fearful, so she admitted, "Okay, so you're not wrong."

Hiccup seemed rather struck by the idea that he was not wrong in saying she'd fallen for him, his mouth moving to the rhythm of the concept working itself out in his head, strong brow furrowing in tandem. He seemed so struck, in fact, that she felt the need to grab his arm and distract him from it, lest he start to actually understand what she'd meant. "Soâ€| maybe we should both stop freaking out?" And they laughed, Hiccup drawn from his puzzlement into happiness, burying his face in his sleeve.

"That sounds like a good idea," came his muffled reply. She patted him on the shoulder, a grin stretching her face. When he came up for air, he took a long look at her. "Last night." Her grin receded a little, he sounded terribly serious. "I was mad about you being all mysterious, and I was mad at my dad, and Snotlout, and I wasâ€"nervous. It wasâ€| really bad, it happened so quickly."



It had been bad, and devastating, like the shattering of a precious figurine; one slipped finger and you had nothing.

"So what you're saying is, 'it's not you, it's me'?" she countered, going for playful, rather than apprehensive that they were continuing to talk about this when she wanted desperately to forget it, even when the latter was a better assessment of her feelings.

Hiccup gave her a compelling look, one that made her insides feel like putty. "It's not you, Astrid. It reallyâ€" Distraction filled his voice, and she thought she saw his eyes skate down past her chin, and lowerâ€"her confidence of last night scattered, Astrid blushed. "It's not you," he repeated emphatically, forcing himself to look out over the waves.

"Well," she murmured, "it's not you either, then." They exchanged a smile. It was not long before the ship would reach Berserker Island.

And the rocky land came into view, rising menacingly from the sea. Astrid and Hiccup stayed side-by-side on the railing through as they glided into the harbor.

"This is going to be tough," Hiccup thought out loud. He had just seen the new crest of the Berserker tribe, flapping on a flag above the docks: what had been a Skrill and then a Night Fury was now a red-and-black wood carving of Dagur's face. Modest, that one. Astrid saw it too, and let out small groan.

Awaiting them beneath the flag was the man himself, wearing the same devilish smile as in his now ubiquitous portraitâ€"Hiccup saw shields and belt buckles and helmets, all carrying the image of Dagur's grinning, tattooed face. He had often questioned Dagur's intelligence when they were growing up, and their interactions over the past year hadn't precisely qualified him as a genius in Hiccup's eyes, but Dagur did seem to possess a talent for commanding people. Into horrible situations, against their will. He had some kind of screwed-up magnetism that way. Stomach kicking, he wondered what had happened to Chief Karl, the interim Berserk leader, but squashed that train of thought hastily when the first image of dismemberment popped into his head.

The Hooligan crew docked the ship and Hiccup dismounted on to the pier, followed by Astrid.

"Aha, the royal couple," Dagur announced, spreading his arms wide in a tremendous, obviously false welcome. Hiccup and Astrid shared a nervous glance.

>"Hi there, Dagur," said Hiccup. Dagur clapped him on the shoulder so hard he nearly tumbled into the bay.<p>

"HICCUP, my old friend. So sorry about that whole mess last time we saw each otherâ€"forgive me?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply, turned to Astrid. She caught a glint of fury in his gaze. "And you're the Lady Haddock now, I presume?" Hiccup winced, and then rearranged his face quickly, sensing Dagur's eyes on him.

"Nope," she said with a forced smile, hanging back from the Berserk party amassed on the pier. "Still just Astrid." Hiccup gestured at



her expectantly. "Uh, and I'm sorry about the thing where I almost killed you. Really sorry." As if to emphasize her own awkwardness, she did a lame curtsey, and then shrugged at Hiccup's puzzled expression.

Dagur stirred, his lips flashing a brief sneer, and Astrid knew she had been rightâ€”she should have stayed on the Odin-forsaken boat. But their mad host, having let his glossy veneer slip, quickly refocused on Hiccup and swung a pseudo-friendly arm around his shoulders. "Not a problem! Let us go up to the hall and eat, and the negotiations will begin." He pinched the skin of startled Hiccup's cheek between his fingers. "We have \_so\_ much to talk about."

\* \* \*

><p>"In what universe," asked Hiccup gloomily through the bars of their cell, "is it a good idea to try and negotiate a peace treaty with someone whose name ends in 'the Deranged'?"<p>

"You get points for optimism," Astrid observed. She was sitting on the floor with her chin in her hands.

(They had been imprisoned about two minutes into peace talks. Hiccup had mentioned something about a five-year truce over the traditional two, and \_maybe\_ some trade restrictions if the Berserks failed to comply, and it was \_bam\_, chains on their wrists, Hooligan guards being whacked over the head, back to that familiar cozy pit, where Dagur lectured to them for twenty minutes about the \_dignity\_ of the Berserker tribe\_ and \_injustices done to our honor\_ and \_frankly, rudeness\_.)

Dragging his feet (or, foot and prosthetic), Hiccup came to sit across from her in the middle of their prison. She gave him a smile, \_at least we're in this together\_.

He grinned back at her. "Think we aced the exam, Astrid?"

"Your dad will definitely be impressed with our negotiating abilities."

"I think so too." But the humor in his face died. "Do you think he sent us here together because he knew it would fail?"

She frowned. "Your father would never put you in danger intentionally, Hiccup." He ducked his head, ashamed to have thought of it, she guessed. Astrid leaned over and pecked him on the forehead. "We'll just have to get out of here together. If anything's going to prove we're a good team, it'd be that, right?"

"Right. Of course," he said, and gave her hand a squeeze.

"You think he's got something planned for us?"

"For me, at least. He didn't know you were coming."

Dagur's last set of challenges had been so pointless and humiliating, Astrid found herself as much annoyed as frightened by the prospect of what was to come. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

They didn't have to wait long, it turned out; they were soon



retrieved from the cell and led up through the Berserker camp to Dagur's quarters, where he sat at the end of a table piled with food—three kinds of cured meats and fish, boiled root vegetables, aromatically fresh loaves of bread. Her stomach growled: she hadn't eaten since yesterday's lunch, having skipped dinner and breakfast out of anxiety.

"Sit," crowed the Berserk leader, his men pulling up chairs, "Help yourselves!"

Astrid plunked right into a chair and went for a drumstick, but Hiccup, sitting opposite, waved her off. She pouted at him. Dagur spotted the disagreement, and grinned. "It's not poisoned, Hiccup, my friend." He reached down the table, pried the drumstick from Astrid's hand, and took a bite of it. The strands of meat hung from his mouth like shredded prey in the maw of a rabid dog. He chewed at Astrid. "See? All good."

She exchanged a disgusted scoff with Hiccup and then tore into some bread, her appetite for meat disappeared.

"So here we are." Dagur settled back at the head of the table. "Three friends, sitting down to a meal together."

Hiccup raised his manacled hands. "But Dagur, where's your friendship bracelet? Oh, that's right, I forgot—" The punch line descended into seriousness, "We're not friends."

Dagur winked at him. "Only as a precaution, brother."

Astrid swallowed a mouthful and started on a boiled carrot, noticing Hiccup grimace at the word brother. "What do you want, Dagur?"

The moment she spoke, the grin slid from Dagur's face, replaced with an expression like a beast caught mid-snarl. Teeth flashing, lips contorted. "I simply want," he said in a low voice, "for us all to get along." Hiccup sighed. Recovering himself, Dagur added, "Tell me the news of Berk, and then we can get back to our treaty."

"All the news?"

"Yes. Perhaps start with why you two are not yet engaged."

Astrid quickly said, "Because we don't want to be."

Dagur spoke in a tempered, drawling voice, his falseness less apparent under the thick glaze of generosity. "And why's that?"

"Because we're not ready," said Hiccup, with a terminating resolve. He did not want to talk about this, least of all with Dagur.

"Huh," Dagur remarked, "well, as long as your parents don't mind, I suppose there's no harm in it." He must've caught the cool glance that passed between Astrid and Hiccup, because he followed up, "Do they mind?"

Neither of them spoke at first. Then they said at the same time,



"They're justâ€"

"My dadâ€"

They stared at one another across the table. A stack of goblets obscured his right ear.

"We don't have to tell you anything about it," said Hiccup slowly, as though he were transcribing the statement in his head.

"What's to tell?" asked Dagur, with a calculating patience that exceeded anything of which Astrid had previously thought him capable.

Hiccup's mouth stayed open, struggling. Watching him, Astrid worried her lip, and then turned to Dagur. She did not see how behaving as if this information was delicate or private helped their situationâ€Dagur could only exploit their weaknesses, and to hide this was to name it a weakness. "Hiccup's father doesn't think we'll be good together because we're too different, and he doesn't think we should see each other until we're ready to get married." Hiccup groaned; the jig was up. Astrid waved a hand to indicate her lack of understanding. "It's got something to do with stuff he and Hiccup's mom disagreed about, I think, he's taking it outâ€"

"What?" came a small voice. She glanced over to Hiccup, whose face had opened with disbelief.

"Oh," she coughed. "Yeah, he saidâ€|"

"You didn't tell me that."

Her eyes flickered upward. "Well, I think he sort of said it to me in confidence, andâ€"

"He's my fatherâ€she was my mother, what'sâ€how is he telling you things in confidence?" Agitated, Hiccup had pushed himself to his feet, fists on the table, shackles clanging. "He got angry when I just mentioned her to him when we were arguing, my mother!"

Astrid was finding it difficult not to feel a bit attacked, what with her boyfriend shouting at her across a table about something she couldn't control, and she too stood up. "You never knew her, Hiccup!"

"So you're on his side, now?"

"There are no sides, Hiccupâ€the only person who's not on our side is him." She pointed to a grinning Dagur, feet propped up on the end of the table.

"I'm having so much fun," said their captor, giggling.

"I can't believe he told you that," seethed Hiccup, turning away from her. "He acts like he hates you and he tells you that, and I'm his son!" The disassociation made her jaw tighten, and she grabbed his arm across the table, demanding attention.

"Stop being an idiot. I know it hurts, you're overreactingâ€"



"\_Overreacting\_," he echoed incredulously, "Are you serious, Astrid? You don't know what it's like, to lose a parent like that and never know her, and to have the one person left who's supposed to love you act like everything you do is wrong, then reveal everything to a \_stranger\_," he shook off her arm violently and she shrunk away, "We might as well not be related, I'm not family, I'm just an heir."

Hiccup had worked himself into fervor, and he fought to catch his breath against the pounding in his chest. The rant, a hormonal pulse, left him feeling drained; he looked to Astrid and saw with horror that her lip had begun to quiver, and her eyes were rimmed red. She held the hand that had grabbed him as though it were scorched. A light switched on in his head—"what he had said, losing a parent, struggling with the one you having left"—his stomach twisted, guilty nausea, he had been so \_stupid\_.

"Astrid—"

"I don't know what it's like," she said like she was trying to agree, but the threat of tears shook her voice. "You're a chief's son, it's different, I couldn't understand—"

"No," he shook his head, reaching for her, but Dagur flung himself up from his chair. A grin split his face.

"GUARDS. Separate cells, immediately!"

And they were being dragged away, him calling after her, and Astrid in affected silence, her eyes on the ground.

## 11. Dilemmas

A/N: So I'm gonna say that there are 3-4 chapters left in this story, but there officially WILL be a sequel, once I finish the modern AU I just started.

\* \* \*

><p>Back on Berk, Stoick the Vast was, like his son, feeling that he had been very stupid.<p>

Small in his hand was the ransom note from Berserker Island, delivered early that morning by ten heavily armed men. One Night Fury in exchange for two teenagers.

"When I was a boy," he told Gobber, "my father, the chief, said never to send an army to a peace summit. That was when peace summits were \_always\_ peace summits."

"Kids these days," Gobber agreed. They were sitting in the center room of the Haddock house, the Berserker group confined to their ship in the harbor, awaiting an answer from Berk's leader. The fire crackled in the hearth, almost too cheerful and inviting, as though it couldn't sense that the heir of Berk and his future wife had been lost to a madman.

After all the antics, all the deceit, he had trusted Dagur—"perhaps



he'd been too absorbed with the opportunity to test Hiccup to see the danger in this so-called treaty, from this so-called friend of the Hooligan tribe. "He'll be furious with me," said Stoick heavily, rubbing his face. "He'll think I set him up for this, like he's meant to learn a lesson."

Gobber stroked an eyebrow. "D'you think they'd harm them?"

"At this venture I can't say I'm in a position to guess anything Dagur the Deranged would or wouldn't do." Stoick rose from his chair, the weight of a child in peril pressing on his heart. "Let's go find that dragon."

\* \* \*

><p>"Astrid," called Hiccup, for about the hundredth time in two hours. "<em>Astrid<em>."

Nothing. Just the drip-drip-drip of water on to the floor of his cell from a mysterious hole in the rock ceiling. The prison was not that large. Hiccup shut his eyes and leaned against the bars.

"Astrid, if you don't want to talk, that's fine, just please say something so I know that you're okay."

"SHUT UP," came the voice of a Berserk guard from somewhere toward the entrance. He flinched, and retreated to the back of the cell. There was some straw on the ground, maybe the remnants of a mattress. Whatever pitiable soul last occupied this drab hole had torn it to shreds, an impulse Hiccup understood. He plunked down and sat with his elbows on his knees, chewing his lip, knowing his face had scrunched in disconcertion but not remembering how to work the muscles, how to relax himself. Here was a problem that was in reality many problems—"Dagur had them, Astrid hated him, there was no escaping as long as they were fighting, and there was no end to their fighting as long as Dagur had them. Dagur would make sure of that, he wasn't a nemesis for nothing. His brain itched with concern for Astrid's wellbeing; what if she wasn't ignoring him after all? Dagur liked the challenge Hiccup presented, so he never genuinely feared for his life around the Berserk, but Astrid—he would've killed Astrid that day when they'd fought, and that was before she humiliated him in front of his entire army. It had taken him a year to recover from that defeat. Hiccup couldn't imagine him taking pity on her. His stomach churned unpleasantly, and he got back to his feet, nerves ticking through him.

"Astrid," he tried again, out into the empty corridor. "Please, say something."

It was his fault. Hiccup had played right into Dagur's hands. He and Astrid had needed to present a united front, that was the whole point of this trip, and he—"him, not Astrid, he was the weakest link—he had crumpled under pressure. At least he could tell his father precisely where the problem lay, now.

Silence. A frustrated cry escaped his throat, he kicked at the hard ground, stubbed his toe, and cried out again, doubling over.

"Calm down."



Hiccup snapped up. "\_Astrid\_?"

She leaned against the other side of the hall, key dangling from her finger, pensive expression on her face. A pink track ran down her cheekâ€"a scrape, from some scuffle.

"Are you okay? How'd youâ€" "

Astrid raised a finger to her lips, and he fell quiet. She crept to the door and unlocked it, careful to turn the key slowly, so the mechanism didn't clunk. Hiccup slipped out into the corridor with her.

"How'd you do it?" he whispered. He wanted to hug her, or take her hand, but she was moving away from him, not meeting his eye.

"You don't want to know. We need to get out of here."

"Astrid, are weâ€" "

"Not now," Astrid said in a brutal tone, the muscles in her jaw twitching.

Hiccup felt lightheaded. He had ruined everything, he was certain of it. Certain doom flashed through his mind: they put off the conversation, the tension between them made their escape rocky at best, so her anger with him only mounted, and by the time they were back on Berk and they'd both had a good night's sleepâ€"because they weren't going to get anywhere with the apologies if they'd just been through this forty-eight-hour captivity ordealâ€"by the time they sat down to talk about it, she'd have mentally dumped him \_days\_ ago.

And then she added, a little gentler, "We don't have time," and started dragging him down the corridor. He felt a surge of reassurance, her hand warmly clasping his arm, and spoke in a gush of affection.

"I love you, Astrid."

Oh, \_no\_.

She stopped shortâ€"Hiccup smashed his nose on the back of her head. Stumbling back, he waited, sinuses stinging, for her to turn around and address him, but after a second and a squeeze to his forearm, she kept pulling him along. Without a look at her face, there was no telling what she thought, only fear and uncertaintyâ€"shouting started up somewhere in the prison, echoing toward them, Astrid dragged him behind her through the damp stone tunnels, the sound of running and arguments ricocheting off the walls, chasing them toward the only way in or out. Chaos around him, chaos in his brain. The dying daylight streamed through the cavernous opening, where two tunnels ran together. Hiccup and Astrid, arriving from the left tunnel, huddled around a corner, while a single guard peered worriedly down the tunnel on the right.

"They found the body," she breathed.

"The \_body\_?"



Astrid glanced at him sideways through her long lashes. "Just unconscious. They must've heard me take him out. Now they're investigating."

The last guard at the entrance started creeping down the tunnel. "He'll see us," Hiccup realized. She nodded.

"When I give the signal, you run for the entrance. Get into the forest. I'll catch up with you."

"Wait, Astrid, I'm notâ€"

"RUN," she screamed, pushing him toward the exit before she sprinted toward the stunned guard, who froze in place. Shoving down qualms about leaving Astrid to fight aloneâ€"she was better at hand-to-hand combat, at all combat, he reasoned, even if his conscience squirmedâ€"Hiccup sprinted out into the twilight, scrambling about thirty yards for the nearest wooded area. He was lucky: the remote path to the prison was empty. He had no trouble getting up an incline to the forest, other than his prosthetic slipping out from under him a couple times. At the tree line, he paused and turned, staring at the entrance.

A minute passed, and then another. The air around the prison mouth did not stir.

He should go back. If she didn't come out in thirty seconds, he would go back, hand-to-hand combat skills or no. He could make something up. He was resourceful! Worse came to worse, Astrid got out and he didn't. Dagur wouldn't kill him, he was sure of that, it couldn't be too bad. If he caught Astrid, on the other handâ€"

She emerged from the tunnel, and headed straight for him. At once he knew from her gait that there was something wrong, a limp. She had been hurt; cover be damned, he burst from the safety of the woods, back out into the open, running to meet her.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, but didn't protest when he slung her arm around his shoulder and started helping her toward the trees.

"You're hurt!"

"My legâ€"it's fine." Grimacing, she wrapped herself around his torso, needing the support. It didn't seem fine.

Once they reached the small hill he took some initiative and swept her off her feet, carrying her the rest of the way. In any other situation Astrid might've objected, but her face had drained of color, and she only clung weakly to his neck. They went deep into the forestâ€"Hiccup kept going, as far as he could, Astrid's face snugged in the crook of his neck, until his arms ached. Upper body strength had never been his forte, no amount of hammering could alter genetics. After twenty minutes of blind escape, of thoughtless forward, he collapsed in a clearing, nearly dropping his precious cargo to the forest floor. His shoulders felt weightless like someone had hollowed them out.

Astrid sat up and, nose wrinkling, flipped her skirt off her thigh. Damp redness circled the gash in her leggings. Woozy but determined,



she started to tear the fabric open for a better look at the injury, but Hiccup fell to his knees and batted her hands away.

"Let me do it." And he ripped the cloth to reveal the offending red score against the white plane of her skin. In the encroaching darkness, the shiny bodily crimson appeared darker, nearly black. It wasn't deepâ€"maybe a couple of inches, but not three or four as he had feared.

He tore a line of fabric off the bottom of his own tunic and bound it tightly around her leg, to staunch the blood flow, though there was not muchâ€"a good sign. "You're going to be fine," he said, hearing the relief in his own voice.

"Did you think I was going to die?"

Realizing he had become absorbed in his impromptu medic duties, Hiccup glanced up for the first time in several minutes, to find Astrid smiling at him, though the lift of her brows made it a little sad, or bittersweet somehow. She was joking with her question, but half-heartedly; he opened his mouth and shrugged. What was he supposed to say, \_yes\_?

"Thank you," she said softly.

He twisted off his knees and sat beside her. "When that bandage is finished, let me know and I'll tear you off another." He flapped his now slightly shorter shirt at her, and Astrid giggled. "Also, you are very welcome."

She gave him another little smile, but the conversation quickly slipped into a lull. Too many things to say, maybe. The big one was on the tip of his tongue, and he wanted to chastise himself for even considering it \_the big one\_. They'd just escaped from prison, Astrid had been wounded, they were now lost (or alternatively, hiding) in the woods on Berserker Island, a place unfamiliar to them. There were a lot of issues that could've been \_the big one\_, but in his own personal grand romantic tradition, Hiccup only cared that Astrid might be angry with him. Everything else, the danger and the running around, that was his week; him and Astrid fighting, now, \_there\_ was a dilemma.

"Are we safe?" he heard her whisper. Night had descended and they sat together at the foot of a pine, under layers of shadow. She meant: are we far enough from the Berserker camp that they won't find us? Are we adequately sheltered from the forest at night? But he wanted to fiddle with the inflection: are \_we\_ safe?

"I think so," Hiccup managed. "I ran north twenty minutes. I think there's a fair amount of forest for them to cover if they want to find us, and they won't do it until daybreak if they're smart."

"If they're smart," she echoed, grinning. It was cold in the darkness of this late October evening, and it would only get colder. She had lost blood and was shivering. He reached out to put an arm around her, that they might be warmer together, and their eyes met. His hand hovered over her, waiting for permission.

"Can Iâ€" "



"Yeah," she grunted, sounding embarrassed that he'd asked.

He drew them together, briskly stroking her shoulders to drum up some heat. "They never tell you to pack layers when you're escaping prison, do they?" he quipped.

"So you love me, huh?"

His head snapped up. She snugged closer to him, her face hovering nose-to-nose with his, imploring. He searched that expression best he could for a sense of how she felt, but in the dark he couldn't tell. At his silence—"because again, what was he supposed to say, she was only repeating his words back to him, and the heat of the moment or whatever had made it tumble from his lips didn't make it any less true"—she glared at her lap.

"It doesn't change what you said before."

"I know."

Raising her head, Astrid looked out over the clearing, to the moon above the pines. She spoke like she was relishing the self-discovery. "I'm mad at you."

"I know," he said again, miserably. "I'm so sorry, Astrid, that was so—"| "

"Stupid?" she offered, with a smile that was more of a grimace.

"Yeah." And then, quieter, afraid, "Are you going to forgive me?"

Astrid twisted to stare at him, slow and deliberate, her brows knit together. The plain-faced expression of deliberation, deciding his fate. When they were children, Hiccup remembered, she had never looked at him, or at least had never seen him, her eyes were always searching out other people and places. It was only once he'd realized he had to be someone worth looking at that he'd earned her attention. Never then would he have guessed there'd be a moment like this one, where she looked and looked—"that was privilege enough, wasn't it? If she pushed him away now, he would know forever that he'd been worthy, at one point, however briefly.

It grew colder by the minute and, shaking, Astrid broke the eye contact to push herself against him. Instinctively, his arms folded around her, that felt right, and her weight on his chest was enough to assuage the fear he felt in the absence of verbal reassurance. For tonight, maybe they did have bigger problems.

And then, after a while, she mumbled (voice growing garbled with sleepiness, head lolling against his shoulder), "Don't say that ever again."

Hiccup exhaled. A winter night and he stayed warm. "I won't."

"Okay," came the small, muffled voice. "Forgiven."

Owing in part to the fact that they were not a little hungry and



dehydrated, Astrid's forgiveness was more ceasefire than truce. As they woke the next morning, and went through the rituals of wilderness survival, he could still feel her watching him when his back was turned, and sometimes he'd catch the worried, distant expression on her face. They got into squabbles over stupid things, which tree they should sleep under, which bushes might still yield berries this time of year. The kind of arguments that meant something else was wrong.

After a while he thought too hard and he began to agree with her uncertainty; what had he ever really done to show Astrid that he understood her life? She had gone in front of her chief to plead Hiccup's case, and he couldn't even lie and say he'd be fine if she went away for a few months! He waited when she told him she needed time, he agreed to keep their relationship a secret as long as she didn't want anyone to know, but those were concessions he'd made at her request. He'd done as he was told.

Then again. How were you supposed to understand someone who hid herself from you?

"You never talk about your dad," he remarked on their second morning. They had spent the previous day trying to move around without leaving tracks, but had loitered on the bank of a stream to catch breakfast. The water babbled at Hiccup's back.

Astrid eyed him, crouched over the tiny fish she was roasting above a tiny fire. (Tiny fish because it was the best they could do in the stream and going to the sea was too exposed; tiny fire because they couldn't risk the smoke being sighted overland.) "What?"

"Your dad. You don't talk about him," Hiccup repeated, sitting across from her with his hands in his lap.

"So?"

He said innocently, "Well, you know, since you talk about him so little sometimes I forget he's even gone."

She raised an eyebrow and rocked back on her heels, a look of revelation and annoyance sliding over her fine features. "You're trying to blame what you said on me not mentioning him enough." Hiccup's stomach dropped.

"Of course not." Except that he was, only he hadn't noticed it when the words escaped his mouth. But in retrospect, yes, yes he was a bumbling liar and an idiot, fine. The mission here had been not to think too often of himself and he had gone and done it again, he had miscalculated. He fought off the urge to go jump in the river and see where that landed him, since clearly this whole empathy thing was proving difficult today.

Back at her fire, Astrid scraped some scales off the fish. "You don't talk about what happened with your leg but I'll never forget it."

Hiccup took a deep breath. She was glaring at the smoky embers now, which made him lonely. He had to resist looking down his leg to the strange metal there, the thing that was as much an absence as a presence. "All right. TouchÃ©," he muttered.



Astrid's head popped up from her work. Her voice, her face, had gone hard. "The whole world is already making everything about you, so I guess it's only natural that you do it too."

Anger surged in his throat. He couldn't be blamed for the way other people treated him, he didn't do that. "That's not fair, Astrid."

She looked as though she would shoot some epithet at him, but the intent melted away when something appeared over his shoulder, wrangling her attention.

"\_Hiccup\_."

He jerked around to get an idea of what she'd seen, but the answer was obvious enough: there in the stream, hooked on a rock, was a shield emblazoned with the red skull of the Hooligan tribe.

Instantly Astrid was on her feet—he saw her wincing, her thigh wouldn't heal for another week at least—and she dragged the shield from the riverbed. "This is one of ours!"  
>Hiccup went to stand over it with her, both of them puzzling down at this wet, weathered piece of equipment. They had agreed that Dagur would not ransom them, his grievances were too personal, so the plan had been to hide out in the woods for a few days, then head back to the Berserk camp under cover of darkness and steal a boat to get them home. The Hooligans were never supposed to enter into it. And yet clearly they were here, on the island, <em>now<em>—the shield had seen combat, but it had not been lying in the water very long at all.

Astrid sighed, and they looked at each other.

"Follow the stream?" he suggested.

"Follow the stream," she agreed.

They arrived back at the Berserk camp—and the water led them straight there, they found more and more battle scraps floating down stream, until they could hear the sounds of swords clashing and men screaming—they arrived to find the Berserks under siege. By the Hooligans. In fact, right in front of the very prison pit from which they'd escaped two nights earlier, Stoick was bearing down on Dagur.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T HAVE THEM?"

"Obviously I'm not proud of it," said Dagur, not immune to the threat of Stoick's hammer hovering two feet above his head. "But they escaped. They're somewhere in the—" Hiccup and Astrid arrived on the scene, the clusters of Berserks and Hooligans making way for them. "—RIGHT THERE!" cried the Berserk chief, pointing stupid at Hiccup, who was now standing not fifteen feet from him. Stoick's eye widened.

"Son!"

"Hi, Dad," panted Hiccup. They had sprinted to find Stoick once



they'd understood what was happening. Astrid hovered silently behind her companion, not seeming terribly friendly toward either chief.

"Son," said Stoick, lowering his voice and his weapon, "I want you to know how sorry I am for all ofâ€"this." He gestured to a Berserk tent currently being consumed by fire.

Hiccup smiled an exhausted but genuine smile, that softened all the features on his face, a flash of his younger self, who'd wanted nothing but for them all to get along with the dragons. "That's great, Dad, but right now I really just want to go home."

"Aye, then that's what we'll do." Stoick raised a mighty hand for his troops, and rallied them for the harbor.

Hiccup caught Astrid's eye for a half-second before she glanced away. The dilemmaâ€"but he heard a familiar roar from lower in the camp, and his heart lifted so perceptibly it might've flown from his chest. Toothless: he was a black bullet bounding toward them, banging into trees with outstretched wings, tongue streaming out the side of his gummy mouth.

The dragon leapt at Hiccup, circling around him in a squirming hug. "I know, bud, I missed you too!"

Nothing less than glowing, Hiccup flipped his prosthetic into its flying attachment and was about to haul himself into the saddle when he saw that Astrid had stopped short of going to the harbor with the other Hooligans. She was watching the Berserker forces disassemble, observing Dagur spit at his men like somehow they had ruined this for him.

When Hiccup put a questioning hand on her elbow, she shook him off. "One second. Wait here."

So Astrid marched over to Dagur, tapped him on the shoulder, and socked him hard in the left eye. He let out a horrible feline screech, and she spun on her heel, booking it back to Hiccup. He let out a laugh, half-terror and half-astonishment, amused in spite of the fact that a small army of Berserks was rumbling toward them, hot on her heels.

"Sorry," Astrid wheezed, pulling them both on to Toothless's back. "But someone needed to do it."

## 12. Something Cool

A/N: It's my friend Bethany's birthday today and this one is for her.

\* \* \*

><p>"When your enemy has the size advantage," Astrid told a class of underaged Hooligans, "you use the size against them. Bigger you are the more energy it takes to move your body." Astrid turned to Snotlout, her assistant for the day. "Okay, charge me."<p>

Having really bought into his part in this demonstration, Snotlout's



face scrunched with concentration as he charged Astrid, releasing a phlegm-clogged battle cry that echoed through the sunny arena. She stepped out of the way with a flourish, and Snot crashed into the corner, panting and grabbing the wall for support. They repeated this pass two more times, until on the third run, Astrid grabbed his arm and deftly pinned it behind his back.

"See?" she said to her students, grinning. The kids, who were all about thirteen or fourteen, broke into small groups to practice, looking alternately terrified and impressed by their instructor and instructions. She helped Snot up from where he lay collapsed on the arena floor, groaning about how this wasn't what he'd signed up for, even though she'd explicitly used the words "exhausting" and "miserable" when inviting him to participate.

When she straightened up, Snot's arm slung around her shoulder, she spied a familiar figure in the otherwise deserted stands. Hiccup gave a little wave; she shut her eyes and went on helping Snot back to his house.

She didn't get through the door—"Spitelout appeared and started going off on his son, and she was smart enough to get out of there before the situation imploded.

Unfortunately, Astrid didn't make it two steps from the Jorgenson house before running into Hiccup, his arms folded across his chest.

"Stop following me," she grumbled, pushing by him, to no effect—he fell in step with her.

"Three weeks, Astrid."

"I needed some space."

"You could've let me know."

"I'm letting you know." She turned on her heel and stomped off again—"except he was with her again, he was a little faster than her, she'd never hated that as much as she did today.

"Okay, space, I get it, but I want to talk to you."

"You're definitely doing that," she sighed, still trying to surge away from him.

But Hiccup threw himself in her path, suddenly taller, but his tone softened. She glared at the leather lacing on the neck of his shirt. "I have something to say to you in private."

She swallowed, looked everywhere but at him. He was right that people could see them here—they were in plain view of the well, the Great Hall, and the Haddock house itself. Astrid wouldn't want to shatter anyone's perceptions about their future—future whatever she was, now. In the past three weeks the approach of winter had been colder than she could remember, and it sat on her heart, draining her of color and warmth. This was the closest she had been to Hiccup since their quiet flight home from Berserker Island: she wanted to hug him, she wanted to sock him right in the eye, just like Dagur.



"Fine," she told him at last. "I have to go finish my class. I'll come by the forge later."

"Promise?"

Astrid shook her head, looking past him; nothing to disguise her annoyance. Not worth the energy. "Yeah, promise."

"Astrid," he said, and when she reluctantly glanced at him, he was holding up a pinky. \_Oh, that's low\_. The freeze she felt melted a degree. Biting her lip, she raised her own little finger, and locked it with his. He smiled at her, and she drew away at once, marching back to the arena where he couldn't win her over, not an inch.

It was late, nearly sundown, when she went to him, but she knew he'd wait there until she arrived. He was stupid like that, utterly devoted. She had something to say to him too, she supposed.

The forge door stood open; Hiccup was at his little table, sewing a bit of leather. She knocked anyway, waiting to enter. That felt weird, but symbolic. He looked up, waved her toward the stool beside him.

With a deliberate frown, she took the stool and dragged it an additional foot from Hiccup's own chair before she sat on it, and then gave him a look that said, plain as day, \_you did this to yourself, buddy.\_

Hiccup sighedâ€”a huge, billowing sigh, cheeks all puffed and round, rustling the papers on his workspaceâ€”and ran a hand through his hair.

"You talk first," she demanded. He'd called this meeting, after all.

"All right." Another sigh, this one smaller, but it rifled the forelock of auburn hair hanging down his forehead. "How's your leg?"

Astrid harrumphed, smashed her boot on the floor. "It's fine. That's not what you wanted to say to me." The wound had finally turned to a scar, but it still pinched slightly when she moved her thigh a certain wayâ€”probably some kind of permanent damage to the tissue, but more than bearable.

Hiccup rubbed his chin. "You're right. It's not." With a deep inhale, he said, "I'm sorry." It had the affectation of meaning it, but after the words had drifted out and dissolved between them, he stayed silent.

"That's it?"

"No." Agitated, or maybe nervous, he climbed from his stool and started to wander the forge. He must've done that a thousand timesâ€”he didn't even look where he was going, he just knew to step over the shield someone had dumped on the floor, the head of a mace poking out at knee-level. "I was really stupid, Astrid," he told the rafters. "I worried so much about my dad not wanting us to be together that I hurt you. That doesn't even make sense. And then I spent that whole time we were with the Berserks worried about whether



or not you were still going toâ€¦" She tensed, and he knew, he must've known what verb to use. "Want me. In the meantime, you could've died. I could've died. We could've started a war." He turned away from the ceiling and saw her, finally. His eyes were green and wide and wet. "So, it would be pretty funny if I lost you because I was too afraid that would happen."

Astrid pushed one of his pens across the table. "I think your dad was right about us."

Hiccup's face fell so fast, the air pressure in the room seemed to descend with it. "Are you kidding?"

"No. I distract you. You'd be a better chief without me."

"I'm not chief yet, Astrid," he said, echoing her fromâ€"it had been years now, she realized. "All these circumstances, they're against us, we haven't gotten to be just \_us\_."

She found herself frustrated with his resistance; she hadn't expected a fight, though perhaps that had been wishful thinking. \_Boar-headed\_. "We're never going to be just us. You and me and all of Berk, we tried the whole secret thing, it lasted a week."

"We'll try again." He started closing the gap between them, which made her seize up, she didn't think she stood a chance in closer quarters.

"No."

"Is that what you \_want?\_"

But she was too slow to say, "I want what's good for Berk," he had caught her, he was pointing a long thin finger right in her face.

"You want \_me\_."

"Nope."

"You're a terrible liar."

"I don't."

He had made it across the room, and he spun her seat around, forcing her to face him; he leaned down so their eyes were level, close enough that she could make out the freckles on his nose. There were at least twelve. That seemed like a lot.

In a low voice, almost a rumble, Hiccup said, "Don't lie. If you're going to do this, tell me the truth." His chest rose and fell with more vigor than usual, he was a little winded, his cheeks flushed red. It had been weeks since they'd kissed. If only she hated him at his most passionate, if only she didn't admire this insistence on truth, if only he hadn't been rightâ€"she was lying. And the want she felt for Hiccup was very acute in that moment.

Unable to come up with a coherent sentence, Astrid threw back her head and shrieked through clenched teeth. Hiccup didn't flinch. When she kept sitting there with her eyes shut saying nothing, he pulled



away (she felt the air near her empty of his warmth) purposefully.

"Let me show you something."

Slowly, Astrid lowered her head and peeked at him. He was standing over his table, puzzling at the bit of leather he'd been working on when she came in. He glanced up at her.

"Will you let me? Show you, I mean. It's cool."

Her throat still refused to work. She nodded, feeling that her face must've been so peculiar, just then. Frustrated lust and surprise.

"Okay. Go get Stormfly, I'll meet you on the green."

\* \* \*

><p>"It's late to be flying," she informed her dragon, who merely cooed and nudged her. They had been waiting for Hiccup for fifteen minutes; in half an hour, there would be no light at all. Perfect for a Night Fury, not as fun for a Nadder. But Astrid fed Stormfly another fish from the feeding station, and kept waiting. She was curious, and it was Hiccup. The weeks she'd not spoken to him, even if it was for her own good, had been miserable.<p>

She wouldn't have noticed him arrive if not for Toothless appearing behind him—he looked different. Gone was the lovingly worn green tunic stretched and refitted by his growth, and the fur vest that made him look even squarer than reality. He had outfitted himself in brown quilted leather, and a hard black breastplate; she could see Inferno bound to his thigh, and all sorts of nooks in the layers of buckling and straps where gadgets might've been stored, secreted away. On the shoulder in red was a skull, the Hooligan symbol; a smaller red badge on his chest was the outline of a Night Fury. The outfit made every step he took seem faster, lighter, and more confident. Blushing, she found it was a lot to process.

"Do you like it?" he asked, aglow with pride as he hopped on to Toothless, and she on to Stormfly.

She managed to get out, without giving away any serious opinion "What is it?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. Just thought it was time for a change. I've been working on it for a few months." Hiccup gazed out at the sea, then patted Toothless. "It does more. Let's go, bud."

And off they went. The dying light washed them in purple and gold, and she pulled up her hood at the biting winter air. Stormfly stayed a length behind Toothless, Hiccup and his dragon leading the way. She had no sense of where they were going, but it didn't particularly matter, she was busy examining Hiccup's new suit from the advantageous rear perspective.

After they'd flown for a time, Hiccup and Toothless began to climb; she imitated them, though apprehensive. The wind up here howled in her ears, stray snowflakes found her bare, freezing fingers. They were nearly in the clouds when he turned back to her and shouted



somethingâ€”the gusts caught the sound, but it looked like he was saying, \_watch this\_. She nodded.

Hiccup detached his lines and leapt from the back of his dragon.

Astrid screamed; she couldn't help it. The surprise strangled the sound out of her, and she clamped a hand over her mouth. \_He is going to die\_, she thought, the most gutting and stark sentence ever to pop into her head; she had wished death on so many people, she had witnessed him nearly die before, but knowing the certainty of death this way was sudden and different. A split second catastrophe; a split second and the vacancy on Toothless's sleek back confirmed everything she suspected she had ever felt for such a dumb boy. Hiccup was disappearing below herâ€”Toothless kept flying, but he must've felt her staring at him aghast, because she saw the glance of a huge green eye, and he dove for his master. Without a command, Stormfly launched after him: maybe she could feel Astrid shaking through her saddle.

As they started to catch up with Hiccup, she noticed that he was falling much slower than she'd thoughtâ€”probably because he had sprouted \_wings\_. He was a little dragon against the expanse of sea below them, the water glinting yellow in the sunset, all the buckles on his suit made gold by the low sun. He might've been a falling starâ€”perhaps she ought to make a wish.

It came back to her: \_show me something cool\_.

The flight suit. He was soaring below her, and flipped over. He cracked a grin. He was fine, he was okay, he had jumped for his own crazy purposes. Astrid could feel tears freezing on her cheeks. She was going to \_murder\_ him for this. He was going to \_wish\_ he'd died crashing into the ocean.

Toothless ducked beneath him, and Hiccup flipped back on to his belly, trying to get to his saddle, but the wind was too strong. He flailed in the air, panic coming into the gestures. Astrid groaned and patted Stormfly's neck.

"Fetch, girl."

Stormfly squawked happily and swooped down, her claws circling around Hiccup's torso. Astrid thought she heard him cry out in surpriseâ€”good, honestly. He \_deserved\_ a scare.

They were soaring straight for an island, so Toothless's solo descent wasn't a problem: he landed easily and Stormfly dropped Hiccup unceremoniously in the dirt beside him, then flapped down a few feet away from the boys. Hiccup sprang to his feet, adjusted his prosthetic, and was promptly knocked to his feet again by Toothless, who grumbled at his master. "It's a prototype, bud," he told the dragon, getting back up again, but Astrid had a feeling this explanation was intended for her as well. "Just like we talked about." In fact, she could sense him looking at her as she slid, stony-faced, from Stormfly's back. And when she turned around, there he was, smiling at her with naïve hesitancy. Waiting for a response. Silence hung between them, needing her attention.

It burst out of her: Astrid punched him in the stomach with every



scrap of energy she could muster (he screeched and danced away from her), and she started to shout. "YOU WILL NEVER DO THAT AGAIN OR I'LL KILL YOU MYSELF YOU BIG OLD STUPID\_ I hate that stupid suit so much take it off right now\_â€" She started chasing him, trying to tear at the buckles and loose wing fabric hanging from his sides. "â€"take it off \_HOW DARE YOU SCARE ME LIKE THAT\_ I hate you so much\_â€" Hiccup caught her by the shoulders, making little soothing sounds. "\_Unbelievable, you ass, how could you not warn me about this\_â€" His mouth found hers, swallowing up the words, and she fitted against him, neat in the embrace, like one of the straps on his perfect tailored suit. It was a kiss all drummed up on the adrenaline and emotion of the moment, angry and unapologetically greedy. She bit his lip, to remind him of her righteous fury.

"Sorry I didn't warn you," he mumbled, and kept kissing herâ€"Astrid couldn't remember ever being kissed like this by him, it was bizarre and exhilarating. No more cloying gentle tongue or awkwardly searching her expression for approval. On this particular day for whatever reason (okay, so she understood; he was communicating an evolution to her) he had lost that boyishness, these were kisses that left her lips swollen, that stirred her blood. From a hard grip on her shoulders his hands slipped down her sides, to her hips, and rested there, though from the way he disturbed the fabric of her skirt she sensed there was more those hands wanted to doâ€"she tried to take one and guide it across the flatness of her stomach, enjoying the sensation of being touched, but he pulled away.

Astrid drew out of their kiss, frowning. "Seriously?"

He was about as red as she, but his jaw flexed in a way that made her think she maybe needed to lie down for a moment. "Not here," he said gruffly. Her heart lurched. "Not outside, it's cold, and it's getting dark, it's not comfortable."

"So if not \_here\_, thenâ€" "

He nodded once, shortly.

Her pulse thudded, and not knowing how to respond in words, she dragged them together again in another snog, this one particularly sloppy. She imagined things were only going to get sloppier from this point on, anyway.

Hiccup broke this one off, groaning into her neck, a sound that did some very good things for her. "I really think we should be getting back now," he choked out.

She smiled, agreeing, and pecked him on the cheek. "I'll go home."

"Are you sure?"

"My mother's away tonight, I think, and even if she isn't, she doesn't care like your dad would."

"Okay," he whispered, frustration fading into nervousness as they started to pull apart and head for their separate dragons. But Astrid caught the whiff of his insecurity, and grabbed his hand before he went, kissing him one last brief time.



"Hey," she said, in a quiet voice, "I love you too."

It was a beautiful sight to see these words dawning across Hiccup's face, to watch him smile and attempt to flatten out the curl of his mouth unsuccessfully, probably in the interest of remaining serious or sexy or something. Whatever—he could try as hard as he wanted, the delight he felt radiated through the clearing where they'd stopped, it made Toothless and Stormfly start to stomp and roar, it made Astrid grin and laugh and push him toward his dragon, so they could start back for the dim light of Berk glittering on the dark horizon.

### 13. Surety

A/N: It's been over a year since I wrote smut. It takes up about the second half of the chapter. I hope it's okay. Gosh. Go easy on me.

\* \* \*

><p>The metal leg had never been good for stealth; lot harder to keep metal quiet against wood than it was leather, or bare skin.<p>

Fortunately, Hiccup's first round of creeping tonight was only into his own house. And he abandoned secrecy the moment he got through the door—Stoick was crashing around the hearth and tossing ingredients into a cauldron. Gobber sat in one of their armchairs, smoking a pipe. The air in the room was pleasant and familial, and miraculously the comfort didn't dissipate once Stoick spied Hiccup.

"Good evening, son," he said. His voice had the cloying warmth of parental regard; Hiccup found himself a little embarrassed by it, actually, unaccustomed to affection from his father, even the modesty of Stoick being pleased to see him. Three weeks ago, when they'd returned from Berserker Island, the two had sat down and talked into the wee hours of the morning, about Berk and their respective errors, about Hiccup's mother and about Astrid, about adulthood and the future. This second incident with the Berserks laid the final straw across the dragon's back. The reality that both had erred so catastrophically invalidated their grudges against one another; only a ceasefire and a mutual promise to be better could stop the volley of mistakes between them. At the end of it, Stoick had called him the Pride of Berk for the first time in nearly a year.

If not for Astrid's embargo on his attention, Hiccup would've been happier than he'd been since defeating the Red Death. And now that was over—he could see only clear skies from here on out. Assuming he survived the night.

"Hi, Dad."

Gobber frowned at him around the pipe. "What in Thor's name are you wearing?"

Hiccup glanced down at the flight suit, remembering the look on Astrid's face when she'd seen it. Pretty good. "Just a little experiment. I'm going to go change into my regular clothes." And the flight hadn't been bad, either.



"Why, are you going out again?" asked Stoick, dumping an armful of turnips into the stew. Gobber wrinkled his nose.

Seized by nerves, Hiccup stumbled over his words, "Well, I don't, noâ€"I don't think I will, I'll just be up in my room, probably, maybe go for a walk or a flight or something laterâ€"don't freak out if I'm gone, you know." He started shuffling for the stairs.

His dad raised a ladle of brown muck from the cauldron. "You don't want any stew?"

"Nah, I ate!" Gobber made a retching sound. "'Night!"

Stoick and Gobber exchanged a bemused but dismissive look and, sensing he was safe, Hiccup dashed up the steps.

\* \* \*

><p>Once, Astrid met prostitutes. They didn't have prostitutes on Berk, but Berk wasn't the South, where there were beautiful women who made their living painting their lips and cheeks and eyes from little pots of rouge and ink, and giving themselves to men. The particular prostitutes she'd encountered lived in a glorious Southern court, wearing silks and jewels and perfuming themselves liberally. And they'd giggled when they heard she was a shield<em>maiden<em>, behind their delicate hands, nails manicured like razors. They spent a week thereâ€"her mother was making acquisitions with the Lord Treasurerâ€"and the women took Astrid as their pet, made her new clothes, gave her little bottles of oil that made her skin glow. Vikings had never put much stock in sex ed, and the Southern women told her things because they wanted to see her blush. But she was past blushing, now.

Of the clothes they'd given her, Astrid only wore the red shirt. Tonight she had pulled out the trunk from her trip, and at its bottom, past fascinating weapons she hadn't yet tried and gold necklaces she would never wear, she found several balled up gowns in a summery material entirely inappropriate for the Nordic winterâ€"but Astrid shed her skirt and tunic and tried one anyway. It felt horrible; she donned all of her gear again just to restore her sense of self, and sat on the end of her bed for a few minutes until enough normalcy had returned for her to remove her boots, shoulder armor, and hood. She had only got her trunk out to find the oil, anyway: a couple of drops applied to her temples and wrists, and the room smelled of orange flower and spices.

So where was Hiccup?

For the winter she had a thick hide across her bed, soft to sleep on and warm to sleep under. Impatient and pensive, she began to braid the long strands of fur, humming a festival song to herself, and then she unbraided the plait across her own head. The curtain of freed hair fell across her shoulders in waves and dimples. It would lose its texture gradually until the morning, when she weaved it back into shape. At every sound from her window she stirred, even the voices she knew weren't Hiccup. Old Mildew cawing in the street as he headed home, the laughter of the twins who were a little drunk. It got late. The sounds faded. People were going to sleep.

He might've changed his mind. But he'd come by to tell her, at least.



It wasn't like Hiccup to make a fool of her. Of all his occasionally annoying traits, she could live with the staunch sense of moral responsibility.

And then she heard him: the rustling in the grass, the gentle scrape of her name in his throat drifting up through the window.

Astrid poked her head outside. Hiccup's face was a white oval against a black plane.

"How am I going to get up there?" he whispered.

"You didn't bring Toothless?"

He winced sheepishly. Astrid shut her eyes, then had an idea. Possibly a terrible one, but hey, there was no telling until she'd tried it. "Wait there," she told him, and then padded out of her room and downstairs.

As Astrid had suspected, Phlegma was sitting in her chair by the fire, polishing her second set of armor. Astrid paused at the foot of the stairs and watched for a moment before she spoke.

"Mother." Phlegma glanced up. "Can I let Hiccup in through the front door?"

There was the question, and then there was the question in the question. Phlegma stared at her, inscrutable. It had been such a long, dynamic day—Astrid's hands began to shake. She didn't know what she would do if her mother refused to allow Hiccup inside, though she'd never discounted the possibility of this outcome. Then Phlegma said, "That will be all right." And she stood from the chair, stowing her polishing rag. "I'll go to bed now. I think that would be for the best."

A smile crept on to Astrid's face. "Yes. Thank you, Mom. Goodnight." She scurried out, with a little wave for Phlegma. She thought she might've seen, out of the corner of her eye, her mother smiling back—but the door swung shut, and Astrid didn't linger.

Hiccup had plunked down on the ground around the side of the house, but he clamored to his feet once she rounded the corner. He was back in his tunic, though missing his vest.

"You changed," she noticed, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice.

Hiccup didn't even try not to sound smug. "I'm sorry, Astrid, did you like my flight suit?"

"Oh, shut up." Taking his hand, she started leading them back to the front door, but Hiccup resisted.

He was glancing back over his shoulder, at the window to her room. "You aren't going to give me a boost up there?"

"No. You're coming in through the front."

Hiccup's head whipped around so fast she briefly feared he'd hurt himself. "Coming in through the front!" She might've been asking him



to fight Dagur one-on-one, such was the strength of his horror at this prospect.

Astrid gave him an unsympathetic look. "You literally jumped off a dragon six hundred feet in the air today. My mom is fine with it." Tugging his arm, she added, "If we don't get inside soon, someone's going to see us."

He hesitated another second, then let himself be led around the house and inside. The main room was empty; Phlegma had put out the fire, and she sensed Hiccup follow her a little closer in the cold, dark space. Up the stairs it was slightly warmer and she had left the lamp burning, so relief and contentment rushed Astrid when she came into her room, particularly considering that Hiccup was there to close the door behind them.

Astrid took a seat on the end of the bed; Hiccup hovered by the door, hands behind his back, shifting weight from leg to prosthetic. His cheeks were red and grew redder when she grinned at him.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey," he coughed, examining a shelf of trinkets. "I've never really been in here before. It's nice, very cozy."

"It's cozier over here." She patted the stretch of soft hide beside her. Head drooping, Hiccup's eyes shut for a moment, and then he marched over to sit on the bed. His arrival rippled the air, a stream of hair fluttered across her vision.

"How come whenever I'm freaking out about something you're always so calm?"

She shrugged, scooting closer to him. "Because we're good together and that's how it works."

Hiccup stared at her, with the intensity and care of working this over in his head, and he started to smile. "We are good together." He leaned over, and kissed her gently. They had lost the heat of their earlier meeting, she realized; it was a lovely kiss and whatnot, but Astrid had other plans. She had been waiting a long time for this, stifling an interest motivated by curiosity and physiological keening. She'd discovered things she could do on her own, of course, but it would be different with someone, and therein lay the real intrigue.

She kissed him back, hard, climbing across the bed to twist her hands into the fabric of his shirt, until she could drag it over his head. Hiccup yelped, finding himself smothered by tunic out of the blue, but she gave another tug and he was sitting there stunned with his hair all a mess and not a scrap on fabric hiding his torso from her. He was square and bony, but less so than Astrid had anticipated; she had seen men half-naked before, but never Hiccup, and she sat back on her knees rather confoundedly, stunned by the white shape before her. The torso carved with flat soft stomach and reddish sprouts of hair and subtle pectorals and freaking nipples—not like her own, these boy nipples, they were laughably useless periods at the end of his chest's pale phrase.

"You really went for it, huh?" he said. She noticed he was eyeing her



bosomâ€"because she'd clutched his rumpled shirt there.

Puzzled, not understanding completely how this had come to her, Astrid squinted at the clothing in her hands. "Was that a little much? Sorry." Hiccup chuckledâ€"\_at\_ her, and she shoved him, tossing the shirt away.

He moved toward her now, the grin on his face relaxing both of them, and poked at the mass of gold slung over her shoulder. "You look like you've got way more hair this way. There's enough hair hereâ€"look," he laughed, draping a chunk of yellow over his own head, "How am I as a blonde?"

Astrid giggled to the point of falling back on the bed, attempting to take him with her, but he popped up again, mirth melting from his face. Concerned, she sat up again, too. Hiccup glared at the floorâ€"at his prosthetic, hands hesitating over the straps, as though he couldn't decide what to do with it. He must've felt her watching because he glanced over, embarrassed.

"Sorry, I justâ€" "

"Don't apologize."

Hiccup drew back a little at her confidence, but on some steely grown-up level, she had readied herself for this moment years ago, when the Red Death happened; she had held this belief firmly in herself, knowing that one day she might need to express it, to tell him what she told him now with the certain tilt of her chin and the firmness of her mouth, unashamed. A little proud, even. He'd made a sacrifice for his people, and that ought to be celebrated, not mourned. There were few things Astrid felt surer about, and she was a woman full of surety.

Nodding, Hiccup drew himself up, feeding off her lack of fear. He started to unwind the straps with a determined frown. "I need to take it off, I think, but I'm not quite sureâ€"|" He eyed her, then the bed, and made a small frustrated noiseâ€"he was locked in thought, examining the situation. It took a moment before Astrid got what he was saying, but ultimately she recognized the expression on his face from countless dealings with mechanical quandaries around the village. Her first thought was that if he could build a flaming sword, he should be able to figure out how to fuck her without the prosthetic's leverage. But, first things first.

"I could be on top," she offered, tugging him toward the headboard the moment he'd detached himself from the leg. Demonstrating, unable to suppress a smirk, she settled across his hips.

Hiccup's mouth hung open; he mumbled, "Seems all right." He had the glint of wonder in his eyes, presented with a treasure trove, imbued with the understanding that there was still much more to see and feel. He went to put his hands on her hips, but one of the studs on her skirt caught him and he yelped, jerking away. With a quick apologetic kiss, she climbed off Hiccup and the bed: there was only one solution to this issue, and so she began to strip.

Gaping again, Hiccup propped himself up on an elbow. Belt, skirt, sliding leggings down and off, and lastly pulling the redness of the shirt over her head. She didn't intend there to be anything



performative about itâ€”just the necessary disposal of a barrier between the two of themâ€”but Hiccup's glazed expression told her that this had been one of the better displays he'd witnessed. Shivering, Astrid crawled back to where she'd been before; now she could put his hands on her waist and feel the calloused pads of his fingers on her skin, dragged up her ribcage, tracing the curve of a breast.

"This is the greatest day of my life," he said, staring up at her, plain and thoughtful and very much in earnest. She laughed, and pulled him into a sitting position, so she could wind her arms around his neck and kiss him. His tentative assessment of her breasts developed into a full investigation, their size perfect for the palms of his hands, thumbs circling her nipples; the caress made her hair stand on end; as she was dragging her lips along the skin beneath his ear, he commented, offhand, "I like these."

"Yeah?" she replied, not meaning to sound skeptical, but she had just noticed the strained crotch of the pants that Hiccup still, for whatever reason, had on, and she was distracted.

"What, is there something else I should be paying attention to?" Answering his own question, he abandoned her chest and slipped a hand down, between her legsâ€”she cried out, not because he'd found it, but it was surprising to feel him there, and to realize how slick she was. Astrid pressed her face into the crook of his neck, catching her breath, and saw him grinning above out the corner of her eye, even though he wasn't even doing anything other than feeling around in the wet warmth like an idiot and thus had no right to be smug.

Drawing away to look at him, she put her own hand over his, and started to guide him. "Remember how to find this." And, groaning through her teeth, she led his fingers to the precious nub that was the pinnacle discovery of her self-explorationâ€”the briefest white flash of pleasure and he retracted his hand, seized by fearâ€”she realized she'd made such a significant sound, he must've thought she was in pain.

He spluttered, "Are youâ€”"

She twisted her hand into his between them, giving him a small smile. "No, it was good. Remember that. But it's time to get your pants off." Hiccup continued to look stunned, this time with her speed in tugging his trouser down his hips to free his erection, until he got with the program and assisted her by wriggling out of them. When she climbed back up him, he was frowning, looking between her and the void where his left foot had been, almost expectant. Like she ought to start putting her clothes back on right about now, or scream, as if she'd never seen a cauterized wound before.

Astrid grit her teeth, pushing him to lie back and pulling the hide over their lower halves. "We are completely naked, why do you think I care about anything other than your cock?"

He opened his mouth to protest, weighed his words, and then nodded resolutelyâ€”his hands found her waist and dragged her hips down, toward his own. That gave Astrid the sudden nauseous surge of nerves she realized for the first time she had been missing up to this point. It was going to happen, the first time of many, with her



husband, her friend, the father of her one-day children. And she thought maybe now would be the time to check in with herself, to make sure this was precisely what she wanted, but even starting to pose this question to herself seemed ridiculous. Hiccup, noticing her second of hesitation, twisted himself to kiss her thigh, which was what he could reach just then. Duh.

With a deep breath, Astrid lowered herself on to him, and her next inhale twisted itself into a whimper. Hiccup's eyes had closed. More than being satisfying the fullness made her need to move, and she ground her hips against his experimentally—the sound that came out of him was pretty stunning.

"Okay," he managed, face screwed up in concentration. "Okay, not going to last very long. Just a—heads up."

Understanding this, she started to test a rhythm against him, but he was shaking his head at once and rose up, taking her with him—Astrid's heart flew to her throat—and Hiccup rolled them over, so he was on top, hands hooked behind her knees.

"Better," he said, beaming.

She mirrored the smile. "Okay?"

"I got this! I got this."

"You do, you got it." She laughed into his mouth when he kissed her. He thrust once, twice, instinctual flickers, and then pulled away from the kiss to adjust his stance, with a grunt that was frankly very hot, in her estimation. His second approach succeeded; she knew he could get leverage; her hands snuck beneath his arms, feeling the furrows along his ribcage as the muscles of her lower abdomen began to churn, gaining potential energy. He poured everything he had into this, chest heaving, hair slicked against his forehead, dim light of her dying lamp catching the sheen of sweat on his neck. She heard herself making little sounds along with the pendulate motions of the fucking, but her senses had flown into overdrive, all she could see was filtered through the hot prospect in her belly, and all she could see was this new vision of Hiccup, a living illustration in black and gold.

He hesitated in a thrust, and groaned out of frustration—they didn't have much time, so she grabbed his hand and returned it to where they'd been earlier, between her legs, muttering for him to remember what she'd shown him. He took her advice eagerly; she had given herself little bursts of pleasure before, but the moment she was being touched and fucked she knew this one would be different. Bigger. It took seconds, flooded her, she came and yelled loud enough that Hiccup panicked and pressed a finger to his lips—so, to swallow her scream, she scratched his back hard. As she came down from it—gulping breaths—he stopped touching her and sped up his thrusts, until his body went rigid and made a noise that was almost a hum. Sort of hot, sort of funny, very Hiccup.

He slumped over, cheek pressed to hers, finished, and very naturally their arms wound around one another.

"Are we hugging?" she whispered.



He pulled up to look at her. "Yeah. Why not? Do you not want to hug me, Astrid?"

"Actually, I was just using you for your body."

He started to laugh, a chuckle at first, and then as he rolled off her he was cracking up, burying his face in the single pillow they'd have to share. "You're hilarious," he informed her, attempting sarcasm, though it didn't really work when he did find her completely hilarious. "Why do you smell so weird?"

She pouted. "It's perfume."

"Eh, I like the Astrid smell. The normal one."

"I'll wear perfume if I want to, stupid," she said, swatting at him. "And you won't care."

Dodging her hand, he grinned, nodded. "You're right." That grin deepened, grew thoughtful, his eyes flicking over her, as though he could not quite believe she was truly here, or that he was truly here, lying naked with her under her bed's winter hide. "Because I like you." For some crazy, strange, out-there reason Astrid couldn't judge, this statement carried far more weight than the spontaneous I love you he'd given her in the Berserker prison. Love bound them, but like? Like was optional. It was a choice. Not better than love, but she would've hated to have one without the other.

Astrid gave him a quick kiss, and pressed her ear to his chest. "I like you too."

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup fell asleep. He <em>really<em> tried not to, but Astrid had drifted off against him, and it was so warm under the coversâ€”he kept promising to extract himself, struggling to keep his eyes open as he stared at his prosthetic on the floor, peeking past the corner of the narrow bed. And that image was the last thing in his head before he passed out.

When he stirred it was definitely morning: the light came in strong through the window, and Astrid sat with her back to him, dressed and braiding her hair. She turned when he mumbled an incoherent greeting, and flashed him a wide grin.

"Finally."

"I didn't sleep that much," he protested. Hiccup made to sit up, but a groan shoved its way out of himâ€”he was sore in places he didn't even know you could be sore.

She snorted. "Good workout?"

"Thank you, Astrid, for making me once again doubt my basic physical fitness." He started stretching out the stiffness in his arms, until she dumped his prosthetic and clothes in his lap. He gave her a rather offended frown.

"Sorry, babe, but I've got an early session at the Academy and I can't be seen leaving my house with you at seven in the morning." She



kissed him as brief condolence, then went back to her hair, this time facing him with a little appraising smile as he dressed. As they started down the stairs, he sniffed himself.

"Do I smell bad?"

She shrugged, not even leaning over to get a whiff of him (which was an answer in and of itself). "Well, you smell like perfume and sex, so I guess it really depends on your definition of 'bad'."

He sighed, then turned back to the stairs. "Bathhouse it is."

Everything was going swimmingly until they got halfway across the main room of Astrid's house and he heard a voice say behind them, "Hiccup."

He froze, turned slowly. Astrid was there, and looking at her mother, Phlegma, who sat in a large armchair that had initially shielded her from view. Astrid seemed disturbingly calm—in fact, she glanced at Hiccup with an expression that suggested he, too, ought to consider chilling out. He went stiff as a board.

"Ma'am."

Astrid's mother had terrified him from the days of his youth, so this situation had a weird, nostalgic effect on Hiccup; to spend a night with Astrid and then be confronted by her mother in the morning was the stuff of his thirteen-year-old self's dreams and nightmares, respectively.

Phlegma said, blank-faced, "I asked you to bring me a whetstone from the forge first thing this morning."

He glanced at Astrid, who seemed as puzzled as he. "I don't remember—"

"It was important that you bring it to me now, first thing." She held up a newish whetstone, twisting it in the light. Hiccup began to understand. "You did well. Thank you. You can go now."

Astrid's eyes had fallen to the floor, but she gave him a quick nod. When he left the Hofferson house at this early hour, he would have an explanation.

"Thank you, ma'am." He gave a little bow, before going to the door, leaving mother and daughter to themselves. "It's always a pleasure."

#### 14. Let's Do It

Annnnnd we're back. For the final two chapters of this story. I hope you've been enjoying it thus far. A couple of weeks have gone by since the last chapter, just so you know. It's not explicitly stated. A little NSFW talk at the top of this chapter.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup was talking.<p>



He had his head in her lap and she put little braids in his hair and thought about the night before, when his head had also been in her lap, sort of. She'd had her fingers in his hair then too, but sloppily, not having the mental steadiness for much else. And there were other differences between then and now—"now it was cold and they wore their winter vestments, where last night it had been warm under the furs and the sweat and they wore nothing; then they had been in the snug confines of her bed and her room and here they were out on the ash island, icy archipelago on the horizon, snow clouds overhead threatening a storm. His lips moved as he spoke and she thought of them moving against her, over her breasts and down her stomach and between her legs, the result of a quiet suggestion but it felt as though he'd planned to go there all along, so willingly had he run with the idea. He liked to drive her mad, didn't he, and he was good at it, stupid idiot, smart mouth, \_genius\_mouth"

"\_Ow\_!"

She snapped out of it—"excited, she had pulled some of Hiccup's hair, and he sat up now, looking offended.

She winced. "Sorry!"

Hiccup put a hand to his head, stroking the sore spot. He recovered from the shock enough to ask, "So what do you think?"

Oh. Whoops. "Uh," Astrid managed, turning her gaze to Toothless and Stormfly, who napped in a heap nearby. She tried to keep a level voice. "Well. You know."

Suddenly a schoolmaster, Hiccup disguised his obvious disappointment with a patient tone. "Did you listen to anything I just said?"

They made eye contact, and the truth emerged. Disgruntled, Hiccup adjusted his seat and made an unhappy sound, while she went about patting his arm, attempting consolation.

"I was just distracted by how handsome you are," she offered hopefully. He tossed her a glare.

"You need to stop trying that one. It doesn't work."

"What were you saying?"

"Are you going to listen this time, or do you want to braid my hair?" She glared this time, and he ducked his head, and went on. "I want to build stables in the caverns under the village."

Astrid sat back, open-mouthed, the ground cold even though the thickness of her skirt. "Dragon stables?" The caverns ran all under the island, but they were dark and frightening and inaccessible. Hiccup had only discovered them because of a Whispering Death attack—"that pretty much epitomized Astrid's feelings about the dangerous tunnels.

"Yeah, I mean—" He started to gesture along with his words, in that emphatically awkward way he did when fueled by strong feeling. "The village is expanding, more people get their own dragons every year,



we're going to run out of space. It makes sense to have a place for the dragons!"

"For \_all\_ the dragons?"

"That's the idea."

There were dozens on Berk already, and if he wanted to accommodate the growthâ€"she couldn't envision the huge structure necessary for this task. But, looking at the determination of Hiccup's chin and the glint in his eyes, she knew \_he\_ could. That determination and that glint had gotten Berk far. And she trusted him now more than she ever had before.

But. "I thinkâ€|" He glanced up at her, excited still, but nervous too. Elbows on his knees, clasped hands dangling in the space between them. "I think you're a little crazy," she admitted.

"I need to convince my dad thatâ€"" As soon as these words escaped him Astrid was frowning. Hiccup caught that but barreled through, insistent, "â€"we can really do it, after everything with Dagur, we need a project. We can prove ourselves to him."

Mediating the expression of impassion that crossed her face would've been impossible, so she didn't try. "We?"

"I can't do it aloneâ€"just me and Toothless, it won't work, I need you to help me plan the practical stuff, and keep people fromâ€"setting things on fire, I don't know." \_What a responsibility\_, she thought glumly.

"It's the middle of winter, Hiccup." With a frustrated grunt, he hauled himself to his feet. "Your father is not going to be impressed if you suggest channeling the village's resources into a pet projectâ€""

"It's not a pet project! Come on, Astrid, think about it." He started to pace, and she stood too, feeling unsettled by stirred emotions. "There's so much we could do for Berk, there's so much more it could \_be\_, we just need him to believe that something this is possible, and thenâ€"then we can do anything!" As he spoke a grin had crawled across his face and now he stood there, arms wide, like the breadth of his passion. His breath ran ragged, exhales unfurling in the chilly air between them.

She hesitated, then scuffed her boot on the ground. "Promise me you'll tell the council it can wait until spring?"

Hiccup's head bobbed, thrilled by her implicit approval. "It can. It can absolutely wait until spring."

"Then I'll help. I guess."

"Ha!" He spun around once on his prosthetic, then stumbledâ€"Toothless's head popped up, then fell back to his paws once he observed Astrid grab Hiccup's arm, steadying his master. As Hiccup caught his balance, she took a step toward him.

"Why is it you always need to be doing something with your hands?" she demanded.



As if to prove her point, he placed them on her shoulders, shrugging.  
"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're restless." She nudged him in the gut.

"And you're not?"

"I'm spirited. That's different from restless."

He laid a palm against her cheek, brow furrowed in not-quite-understanding, which sent a funny wave over her whole body, and for a moment she couldn't remember how to speak. "Bad different?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I guessâ€¦ I guess it wouldn't be so bad if some of the stuff you did with your hands could beâ€¦to me?" Despite her best effort, she smirked a little on this line, and Hiccup's hand fell away. He had not expected a come-on.

"That's every night this week, Astrid!" The strain in his voice read somewhere between scandalized and flattered.

"You're not enjoying it?" There was a real note of doubt in this question, much to her surprise. Despite Phlegma's rigorously contrary rearing, a young girl on Berk couldn't escape the traditional wisdom that a wife's duty was to please her husband and bear him children, above everything else. They were not married, of course, not yes, but if she couldn't do it nowâ€¦when all was new, and \_exciting\_â€¦

"No, that'sâ€¦definitely not it," he said, with an oddly truthful eye roll. "Like really, really, notâ€¦" She blushed, distracting Hiccup, who struggled to get on with his point. "\_Listen\_, you know, we have to be carefulâ€¦"

"I'm drinking the tea Gothi gave me!" she shot back, not mentioning that it tasted distinctly of piss, and gave her crippling bouts of nausea.

He shook his head, "I don't \_trust\_ the tea."

"Well, we can justâ€¦" Astrid brushed a nonexistent bit of dirt from his shoulder, innocent. "Do more of the stuff where that wholeâ€¦business, isn't a concern." When she glanced up, his cheeks were red, his eyes were searching her person and finding recent memories, recalling vivid knowledge. Embarrassed lust. Cute \_and\_ \_satisfying\_.

"Was itâ€¦" he began, but the timid insecurity wouldn't let him get out the words. Convenient, then, that she could read the question in his face. \_Was it good?\_

Astrid leaned in and said by his lips, "What do you think I was so distracted by before?" and kissed him before he could splutter in disbelief or indignation. Hiccup's shoulder's dropped three inches, and he sighed against her.

When they'd parted, he started for Toothless. She saw why: the storm clouds were gathering. They would need to head home, lest they get caught in a blizzard. "I'm sleeping in \_my\_ bed tonight," he called



over his shoulder, adjusting his leg for the flight.

"Am \_I \_sleeping in your bed tonight?" Astrid sauntered over to Stormfly, who stretched lazily.

Having hauled himself on to Toothless, Hiccup let out a single, short chortle, defiant. "No. Definitely not."

"Why!"

"Astrid!"

She groaned, settling on to Stormfly's back, "You're never going to want to just spend a day in bed with me, are you?"

Toothless bucked under him, ready to fly. A hand on his dragon's neck, Hiccup squinted at her. "A whole day? Like twenty-four hours?"

"That's how long a day is, Hiccup!" With confusion playing out openly across his face, she started to laugh.

"A whole day \_inside\_?" he asked again, still astonished, his dragon desperate to go, to do. Funny how sometimes Toothless could read Hiccup's mind, or behaved as though he were an extension of it, even. Each of them was, to the other, an altogether more powerful appendix than the one they'd lost.

So she waved a hand to call him off, shook her head. "Restless. It's a good thing I love that about you." And they set out for home, staying just ahead of the snow.

\* \* \*

><p>"Where's your boyfriend, Astrid?"<p>

For a half-second, just a half-second, because any longer and even Snotlout would've caught on, Astrid shut her eyes. Ruff had been referring to Hiccup as her boyfriend in jest consistently for the past few weeks, even after they returned from Berserker Island and she wouldn't speak to him. She sometimes forgotâ€"\_understandably\_â€"that Ruff didn't know how pointed her joke was.

"He's not my boyfriend." She tried to say it like she had said it all those times before, with just the right amount of revulsion and calculated ambivalence. "And I don't know where he is, he should've been here by now."

They, them, the gangâ€"herself and Ruff and Tuff and Fishlegs and Snotloutâ€"mulled aimlessly around the arena in front of a group of young Berkians. They'd had to spend an hour clearing the arena of the previous night's snow using dragon fire, and now the ground was puddled and damp and cold on yet another freezing winter morning. Every Hooligan had on their heaviest furs.

"Hiccup was supposed to help me with the lesson," Fishlegs said nervously, eyeing the kids. They were between five and eleven years, about ten little ones in all, and they stared at the older youths with saucer-like eyes. The day's lesson paired them with infant



dragons, and focused on basic care, grooming and waste etiquette and whatnot. These were the youngest kids they'd taught, so far.

"What's a boyfriend?" a girl of about six asked Astrid, sounding annoyed. Some of the other children giggled.

Out the corner of her eye, Astrid saw Ruff shake her fist excitedly, as if she'd been waiting for this moment. Which maybe she hadâ€"Astrid wouldn't have put it past her to bribe a small child into asking invasive questions. And she could sense that Tuff and Fish and Snot were poised for her response, too, albeit with a degree of fear rather than glee: Fish might've been waiting for a bomb to go off, from his expression. What, did they think she was going to chew out a tiny person? Honestly, if there was anything about this to make her angry, it was that they \_expected\_ her to be angry.

Tossing her friends a glare, she turned back to the girl, and rearranged her face more pleasantly. "A boyfriend is what comes before a husband. You're Brenna, right?"

She nodded. She was smaller than the other girls her age, with reddish brown hair and freckles. Maybe a cousin of House Haddock, Astrid couldn't remember. Brenna said, small face scrunched, "You're \_Astrid\_?"

"Yes, I'm Astrid." The way Brenna said her name was likeâ€"there was awe in it. No one used to know her name.

"My mother told me we're all going to have to listen to you, one day."

Some of Astrid's diplomatic confidence slipped away. Ruff was no longer smilingâ€"nor did the boys look so much frightened as sobered. Astrid could feel fourteen pairs of eyes on her, waiting. "Why does she say that?" she replied stiffly, not sure how to respond beyond pretending to misunderstand the statement.

"Because she sees Hiccup-the-chief's-son coming from your house in the morning." The young ones didn't understand, but behind her, Fishlegs gasped gently and Tuffnut let out a low whistle. Brenna stared up at Astrid, who could hear her own heartbeat thudding in her ears. "If boyfriend comes before husband, then whyâ€"

"Brenna," said Astrid, smiling, speaking through her teeth. "I want you to tell your mother that you told me these things, okay?" The girl, a little sheepish, nodded. Astrid had better get a basket of salted cod or a new saddle from this woman; Brenna's mother ought have known better than to say such things about someone they would all have to listen to, one day. "Fishlegs," she swung around, "Go on and start the class. I'm going to track down our wayward future leader."

As she started out, Ruffnut chased her a few paces, whispering, "I \_promise\_ I only paid her to say the first one, the rest was \_all Brenna\_." Astrid ignored this revelation.

"That girl is smart. Give her private lessons in everything." And she swept out of the arena, leaving education to her peers for the day.



She checked the forge, the Great Hall, the Haddock house, the armory, and even called down into the caverns before she finally found him high above the village, near Gothi's, leaning against a sunning Toothless, who'd cleared a patch in the snow for them. He had his notebook on his lap and was sketching furiously, hands stained black with charcoal. More likely than not, he hadn't even realized what time it was, nor did he look up when she approached.

"You know there's a class now that started twenty minutes late because of you, right?"

Hiccup's gaze stayed glued to the paper. "I've told Fishlegs a hundred times he doesn't need me there anymore."

Astrid stood over him, letting her shadow swallow up his work, so he was forced to stop. Finally, he squinted up at her, shielding his eyes from the sun's glare, and from Astrid's. "It's your academy, Hiccup," she told him sternly.

"I'm done with the academy."

His nonchalance caught her off guard. "What do you mean, you're done with the academy?"

"I mean, I'm leaving it to Fishlegs and you guys, I've decided." He was back at his sketchbook, and, overcome with frustration, she bent down to rip it from his handsâ€"except that he hollered and held on, and their tug-of-war over the volume dragged him to his feet.

"Stop what you're doing for two secondsâ€"

"Astrid, stop it!"

She let go of the book and sent him stumbling backwards, and he fell into Toothless briefly before recovering his footing. Between Brenna and this sudden announcement, Astrid was feeling a little shaken. "You can't just say you're done with the academy."

"But I am, I figured out something else I want to do!" Eagerness crept back into his voice, as he checked the pages of his precious notebook, and recovered his pen from the ground. Moved by his beingâ€"sweet, oh, whatever, she had earned the right to think of him as sweet and not feel embarrassed by her sentimentality when so much cloying sentiment had already passed between themâ€"she lost a little of her anger, and rocked back on her heels in thought.

"Is this about the stables?"

"It's not about the stables, it's about what the stables are about." She struggled to understand this sentence, but he had taken her hand and was pulling her down to sit with him next to Toothless, beaming. "I figured it out, Az," he exclaimed, "I figured out what we're going to do."

Astrid thought she might have missed a plot point, here. "What we're going to do?"

"Something important for Berk," he said, and she flushed to hear her own words of so long ago repeated back to her, like being reunited with a beloved childhood toy. Who had that person been, who



loved the idea she would be remembered? It seemed silly now that she had ever doubted. Of course she would be remembered, she wasn't going to let anyone \_forget\_. "Look." Hiccup set the book between them.

She saw lines and more lines, and Hiccup's scratchy writing. \_Supports. Structure\_. "What is this?"

"It's a plan. Here are the stables, with aâ€"you know you can access them through a gap in the cliff wall? We'll build a runway there," He gestured down to the cliff in question, as though pointing out the landmarks on a map, and turned a page. "Then you've got an upgraded fire prevention system, an entire network of above-ground pipes running all over the village, from a rainwater reservoir." He pointed to another location in the village; turned another page. "And stands for dragon racing," The harbor; another. "And a granary, with a windmill." A sheep pasture.

"Hiccup, this isâ€"|"

The Berk of these designs was not the Berk that lay before them, small and quaint and colorful. This Berk was architectural; streamlined; ahead of its time. It was Hiccup's Berk.

He took her hand and watched her, smiling, biting his lip at the same time. It struck her as a strange, beautiful gesture, drummed up on anticipation and excitement and affection. He wanted it to be her Berk, too, she realized. The thing about New Ordersâ€"they're new. Unfinished, fresh paint. Even a Viking of the Old Order can find her place in the New Order, particularly when that's what the New Order is all about.

"It's a lot."

His face fell. "Well, yeahâ€"|"

"And it's amazing." They shared a grin, wide, wider. "We should do all of this."

Hiccup exhaled sharplyâ€"he had been holding his breath. "You really think so?"

"Yeah," she said, and pecked him on the cheek. "I really do."

## 15. Together

**\*\*Well. Here's the last chapter.\*\***

**\*\*A sequel would pick up after the second movie. There are a lot of great fics that deal with post-HTTYD2 so I'm not as set on it as I once was. But I'll think about it, and you can tell me if you're interested. My writing tumblr is nneurosis, and it's far and away the best place to reach me. Plus, I might do you a drabble.\*\***

**\*\*Thank you for reading.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>To Hiccup's surprise and delight, it was Stoick who insisted on a



huge party to unveil the completed stables, nearly seven months after the village council had first accepted the plans.<p>

It was September now; Hiccup had spent the rest of the winter refining his design with help from Gobber, and they broke ground on the first day of spring. Astrid took charge as the project's foreman when it became clear that Hiccup couldn't quite handle conceptualization and execution—one day he became so overwhelmed in the midst of arguing with his father and Gobber over some logistical quandary, he'd just taken off on Toothless and stayed gone for the rest of the day. Maybe fearing his standing might suffer in the chief's eyes, Astrid had filled Hiccup's vacancy. She told him about this later, in casual passing, but it made his heart swell. He would have been hopeless without her, really.

She stayed on in the leadership role, overseeing the collection of all lumber used in the construction, felling a hundred trees in a month, many of them single-handedly, and coordinating the transportation of materials halfway across Berk into the caves, assisted by the combined efforts of the other dragon riders and their bigger, stronger companions. Meanwhile, Hiccup half-lived in the caverns, watching the structure grow to astonishing, satisfying proportions under his careful conducting.

And it was beautiful. The stables, sturdy and intricate like a beehive. The massive and elaborately engineered hangar, where just an hour ago the villagers had finished slapping on a final coat of paint. Indeed, it was so lovely, Stoick decided that the party ought to be in the stables—so Hiccup gave his morning to helping haul furniture into the caves, and his afternoon to barrels of mead and crates of salted cod and stacks of fresh bread, now laid out across tables, awaiting the festivities. Through the hangar's gaping entrance, he could see the sun going down. Gobber began to light the stables' wrought iron hanging lamps. Hooligans trickled down the stairs, laughing, shouting, some of them already drunk. From Hookfang's stall on the second level, Snotlout's voice drifted down, warning his dragon about the particular flammability of his new home—not that he needed to, Hiccup had made sure all the wood was treated with a fire-resistant resin made from discarded dragon scales, a very useful invention.

Eventually it grew so crowded in the atrium space that Hiccup felt he could no longer lurk there without being drawn into conversation, so he went to slip out, planning on a late return when the party was well underway and he could engineer an escape with Astrid. But, as a poet would remark some many years later, the best-laid schemes of mice and men—Stoick blocked his exit, a grinning obstacle.

"Oh, hi, Dad," he said, trying to disguise his dismay.

"Son," Stoick put a pan-sized hand on his shoulder, "You'll make a speech tonight."

"A speech?" echoed Hiccup, glancing over his shoulder. He felt a little adolescent fear kick at him; there were dozens upon dozens of his people gathered here, and he would have to speak in front of them, cold?

"Aye! You did this," said his father, with a sweeping motion to the dim, vast tiers of dragon stalls. He nudged Hiccup away from the



staircase leading out, back toward the masses. "They want to hear from their future leader. A chief talks to his people, son." Much to Hiccup's chagrin, Stoick had a point. But it didn't mean Hiccup needed to be here now.

"Okay, Dad. Speech later. Gonna go!" He slipped under Stoick's arm, to the stairs. "Work on my remarks, you know. Wanna be sharp!" As he turned and sprinted out, he heard his father laughing down below.

He was halfway to the surface, pressing himself against the walls of a landing to let a family pass on their way to the party, when he heard a voice from one of the tunnels off to the side. "Psst!" Twisting around, he saw the bright blue of Astrid's eyes in the lamplight. She leaned against a wooden support, winked at him "when the villagers had passed, he crossed to her, grinning.

"Waiting for me?"

She chortled. "Looking for me?"

"Maybe."

Astrid slipped her hand into his, and drew him into a tunnel he knew wound around the second tier of stalls. While the stables were sometimes maze-like "he had been limited by what tunnels already existed in the caverns" the centrality and openness of the atrium always anchored one's location. He could hear the party going on there, now in full swing.

Hiccup leaned forward as they walked, speaking into her ear. "My dad wants me to give a speech in front of everyone."

"Sounds like a good idea." He spied a smirk on the corner of her lips, irritating, endearing him.

They paused at Stormfly's stall, which was empty but for Astrid's axe propped against a beam and a layer of rushes on the wooden floor "hers was one of the stalls built out of the rock, it protruded into the main chamber. The sound of the festivities grew louder once they entered the nook; if he stepped to the outer railing, he would be looking down at everyone like on a balcony.

Preoccupied, Astrid kicked at the rushes. "Look at this." He could see the planks of lumber better now: they were ill-spaced, big gaps between, all of different widths. She tested her weight on a particularly rickety board and it clicked dangerously. "I told Tuffnut he could work on Stormfly's stall, but I thought he'd be supervised," she said, glaring.

Hiccup frowned at the structural issue, but he was certain this was the only part of the stables Tuff had been allowed near, so not a huge concern. "Gotta say, that's ninety percent your fault for being too trusting."

"Whatever. Can you just get Gobber or someone in here to fix it?"

He gave a small bow. "First thing tomorrow, milady."



"Good." She sucked her lip, and took a step toward him. "So you're nervous about the speech, huh?"

"Well, you know. Me, public speaking," he said, and saw her smile at the deflecting shake of his shoulders. Arms across her chest, she started to circle him.

"I've seen you give a lot of speeches. Good ones. You know how to convince people."

He raised a finger, shaking his head. "That's differentâ€"convincing people when if you don'tâ€" I mean, the stakes are different. I can't just chat with the whole of Berk about the stables, what am I going to say?" The thick colored beams ran past them, all over the cavern, bigger than words. "I think it speaks for itself."

"Then say that." Smiling, she stepped into him, and naturally their arms wound around one another. Down at the party, someone started up a slurred song about a warrior and a fair maid. "It'll be fine," she insisted and, to silence the small doubtful noise he made in response, she kissed him.

It had been another long nine months of refusing to stand too close in public and jokingly referring to their nights together as trysts and becoming more creative in their avoidance of procreation. He thought everyday of asking her when, if ever, they could confirm what the village had long suspectedâ€"not even an engagement, just whatever would render acceptable his desire to greet her with a peck on the cheek or to take her hand during difficult civic debates. They had perfected their system of private mutual support, and he had trouble with the notion that they couldn't do the same in public. Once it was known that Astrid would be his wife, there'd be no denying his demand that she be admitted to the important conversations where he needed her most. They would have to see her for what she was, their future co-chief, and the whispers would cease.

But he was afraid, too. Apprehensive that, should he suggest it, she would wrench away what he did have of her company. Not a rational fear, but it was enough to keep him patient in awaiting a decision from Astrid to go public.

And it wasn't as though he suffered. She kissed him harder, and then moved her lips to his neck. Suddenly it was burning hot in the cold rocky climate of the caveâ€"or perhaps his blood had stirred. Probably the latter. Yeah, no, definitely the latter. "You want me to help you relax?" she muttered. Her breath blew balmily against the sensitive skin along his jaw.

"Whatever you want," he managed, but she could probably hear the answer to her question in new, higher pitch of his voice. Giggling, Astrid nudged him backward, maybe to pin him against a pillar before doing whatever it was she intended to doâ€"he had a few ideasâ€"but before they got there, a terrible thing happened.

He took a step back on to one of Tuff's rickety boards, and the joint where the wood had been secured gave way.

Hiccup fell back, and Astrid fell on him, and they slid down the boardâ€"both screaming at the shock of itâ€"landing hard on the first



floor of the cavern in a flurry of hay and limbs and squeaking, rolling a few feet so that Hiccup lay on top of her, clinging to each other as they caught their breaths. He patted her face, trying to make sure everything was still there, in tact.

"Astrid! Are you okay!"

She grunted and pushed his hands away. "I'm fine." Relieved, he kissed her and then pressed his cheek to her chest in a tight hug. "Weirdly, she didn't seem responsive, but he was too frenzied to consider it.

And then, as he was lying there trying to recover from the panic, he felt her voice shaking by his ear. "Hiccup, I really think you should get off of me."

For the first time, he noted how silent it had gotten. Not just between them, but in the whole room, in the whole \_cave\_, as if the party. "as if the party."

Feeling his lip begin to quiver, he raised his head slowly, and looked out from where they'd landed beneath Stormfly's stall. It was a little alcove, used for storage, and it opened. "without the protection of any wall or screen or door" right on to the main chamber.

The main chamber where the entire population of Berk currently stood, staring at them.

He saw Gobber and the twins and Snotlout and Gothi and Phlegma and Mulch with Bucket and Silent Sven shielding the eyes of a little girl. He saw Fishlegs actually turn his back, as if he felt the need to give them some privacy. The expressions were mixed. "horror, surprise, amusement, discomfort. He knew what they saw. He'd heard the phrase, a roll in the hay. Hiccup thought, with a great deal of certainty, \_That's it\_. \_We're dead\_.

Knowing his face was red enough to rival a good sunset, he climbed off Astrid and helped her to her feet. The silence in the room turned to a low titter. People starting to mutter to each other. Astrid had color in her cheeks, too, but it looked more like the flush of exercise and surprise than real embarrassment. Her jaw was hard, fixed, as she glared out at their audience. He knew what this meant for her. "suddenly, he was awash with guilt.

Ruff turned to Tuff, breaking the stillness with a shout: "TOLD YOU! You're cleaning Barf and Belch's stall for a \_month\_."

Somehow, this statement ushered in a \_round of applause\_ from the partygoers, who were now laughing, toasting, trading jokes about the whole thing as their eyes flicked between Hiccup and Astrid, and whoever they'd partnered with in gossip. Some of the glances they got were devious, reprimanding. Disrespectful. For Odin's sake, he would've preferred disappointed silence to \_laughter\_. It was far from how the two of them had intended to introduce themselves as a couple. "this wasn't how they wanted to be seen by their future subjects, as some sort of adolescent joke. Hiccup watched Astrid; her hands balled at her sides, she turned away from him, and from the crowd, making a few steps toward the exit.



Panic seized Hiccup. He caught Stoick's expression for a moment, inscrutable on the opposite side of the room. Probably ashamed. But Hiccup had an idea. To fix all of this. Sort of. Maybe. Wellâ€"it was worth a shot, you couldn't call him risk-averse.

With a multitude of eyes already following him, he made a dash through the crowd for the cavern's central staircase, bounding up half a level so everyone could see him properly, on a stage. More stirrings from the Hooligans, more laughter. He stood above them, drawing himself up as best he could. He was taller than he'd once been. He thought he maybe had another couple of inches to go. He hopped a little in place.

"My father has asked me to make a speech!"

The noise didn't die downâ€"if anything, it seemed to swell now that everyone could stare at him. He tried not to look at the alcove, he knew people would notice him checking on Astrid, but he had to make sureâ€"she was still there, yes, peeking out from behind a support beam.

"My father has asked me to make a speech!" he said again, louder, feeling his chest boom with the words.

They were paying attention now, smiles and whispers dying from their mouths. He'd stopped hopping; he stood there now, thinking how it looked when Stoick spoke to the people like this. Trying to fill himself with that same authority and honor and reason.

Hiccup went on, "He asked me to make a speech about the new stables. He said that this was my project, like I could tell you something about it that you don't already know." For the first time, he noticed his heart had been hammering at his chest for a good ten minutes now, but finally his pulse began to even out. "But I can't. Because it was my idea, maybe, sure, butâ€"but it was just an idea. We're not standing in an idea. We built this together, all of us. This belongs to Berk." The glow of pride came over the faces in the crowdâ€"faces he'd known his whole life. His dad used to quiz him on names during the council meetingsâ€"and that man over there, who is that?\_ Hiccup knew everyone. "Thank you for helping me."

They clapped. An altogether less humiliating ovation. But he didn't step down; he took a deep breath.

"And none of it really could have happened without Astrid Hoffersonâ€"Astrid, could you come up here?" he called above the applause, which faded at the interruption. People were gaping now. Astrid emerged from her hiding place, scowling up at Hiccup. Hesitating. "Please!" Disgruntled, she started to weave through the villagersâ€"all of them staring at her like a goddess incarnate, breathtaking but scary powerful. She climbed the steps and stood beside him with her arms across her chest and her shoulders hunched. "Astrid," he told the crowd, but he watched only her, "was the first person to tell me the stables were a good idea. She's been the first person to say that about a lot ofâ€"|" She glanced at him, weary, a little sad. "If it weren't for Astrid, we'd probably still be at war with the dragons."

Silence in the room. No one had ever heard this said of her. Hiccup got the credit, usually, and he knew better than anyone how unfair



the popular version of events was.

"So, anyway." He'd gotten quieter, as the need to raise his voice waned. "I just wanted youâ€"everybodyâ€"to know that. Because she's going to be my co-chief, one day." Astrid's mouth fell open, she stared at him. "You'll have to listen to her just like you listen to me. Might as well start practicing now." She turned her gaze out to the Hooligans, eyes wide on both sides; it was as though they were meeting her for the first time, and she them, more than a girlfriend, more than a chief's wife; a queen. A leader in her own right.

He remembered what she'd said the first time he offered the position to herâ€"you're giving up a lot of your power\_. And to publicize that concessionâ€| she probably thought he was crazy. Maybe he \_was\_ a little crazy. But he didn't want to be something to limit or inhibit her, some sacrifice of freedom for love. \_Partners\_. He offered her his hand, and she took it, shutting her mouth.

He said under his breath, "Say something to them."

"I don't have anything to say."

"Just one thing."

She shut her eyes for a moment, squeezed his hand, then turned to the crowd. "I'mâ€| honored. Berk isâ€| is my home, I care about it. I'm going to do what's best for it. For Berk." Astrid tossed Hiccup a pained look, but he figured that was enough. He grinned in reply.

"ARE YOU ENGAGED?" shouted someone at the back of the room, an anonymous male voice, making Hiccup jump.

"NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS," Astrid roared back, immediately, making Hiccup jump again. Embarrassed by her own forcefulness, she drew back and added, "Sir." The Hooligans laughed, and Hiccup saw her smile for the first time throughout this ordeal.

Taking advantage of the break in tension, he waved to the crowd and pulled them from the stage. The people parted to make way, bowing to the two of them. Judging from her expression, Astrid had starting to climb from frazzled to confident. They met Stoick and Gobber on the other side of the room, where his dad shook her hand and clapped him on the back. Gobber whispered something to Astrid and she laughedâ€"with the way they were eying Hiccup, it was probably a joke at his expense, but today he could take it.

After Stoick and Gobber came an army of well-wishersâ€"they formed a line for a while, actually, like this party had taken on a new connotation under Hiccup's brash announcement. Eventually Astrid got carried away by Ruff, for what girlish purposes Hiccup didn't know, but the disbanding of the royal couple killed everyone's interest in talking to him, so he had some mead with Snotlout and Tuffnut and Fishlegs. More mead than usual. More mead than ever.

So when Astrid came upon him several hours later, he was drunk.

He sat on the far end of the hangar, away from the activity, dangling his legs off the side. Berk's harbor lay a hundred feet below them. She could see the alcohol in the lopsided grin on his face, hear it



in the song he hummed to himself. "This is the worst place for a drunkard such as yourself to be sitting," she declared, plunking down beside him.

"Ah. But I have the ultimate safety net." He gestured up: she spied the green of Toothless's eyes. He was curled up on the edge of the hangar's roof, and greeted her with a squawk.

"I see."

Sighing, drowsy, he put his head on her shoulder, and then into her lap. "What if I slept here?"

"I'd push you off the edge, into the harbor."

"True love with us, eh?"

She laughed, started to work a little braid into his hair. "The stables are amazing, Hiccup. You really did it." She couldn't believe itâ€"that they were sitting on something as huge as this hangar, and it was all made by the hands of Vikings. She'd known they were a strong people, but this was beyond anything anyone had ever dreamedâ€"excepting Hiccup.

"\_We\_ did it." He pouted up at her. "Didn't you hear my speech?"

"I did, I heard your speech."

"Did you like it?" he asked eagerly.

"I loved it. Not so hot on the part where you made me get up there with you, but you did a good job making peopleâ€" it was good, it was smart."

Hiccup struggled to sit up, and she steadied him; she did not \_actually\_ want for her boyfriend to fall into the harbor. "Hey. I meant what I said, I wouldn't lie to Berk. I couldn't have done it without you."

"I didn't say you lied," she replied, hesitating.

He gripped her upper arms, trying very hard to be serious through the mead, face screwed up in concentration. "I want you to say, 'We did it together.'" Astrid rolled her eyes, but he shook her gently to get her attention. "Please say it, Astrid!"

She groaned, "We did it together."

"Thank you." He kissed her on the cheek and she made a retching noise, then struggling from his embrace and got to her feet, pulling him with her.

"Okay, time for bed, big day tomorrow."

"Big day? What's tomorrow?" he asked, eyes half-lidded. She thought of his book of plans, the newness, the promise of change. The changes that had already occurred. Even the two of them, they were not the people they'd been three years ago, and he was right: they'd done it together, except for when they needed to be apart. And when they \_were\_ apart, they let each other go, and there was togetherness in



that. Even when she was alone, he was with her, and she with him, her friend and husband and partner. Not sentiment, just fact.

"I don't know, exactly." She looped his arm around her shoulder, supporting him. A big day. "With us, they always are."

End  
file.